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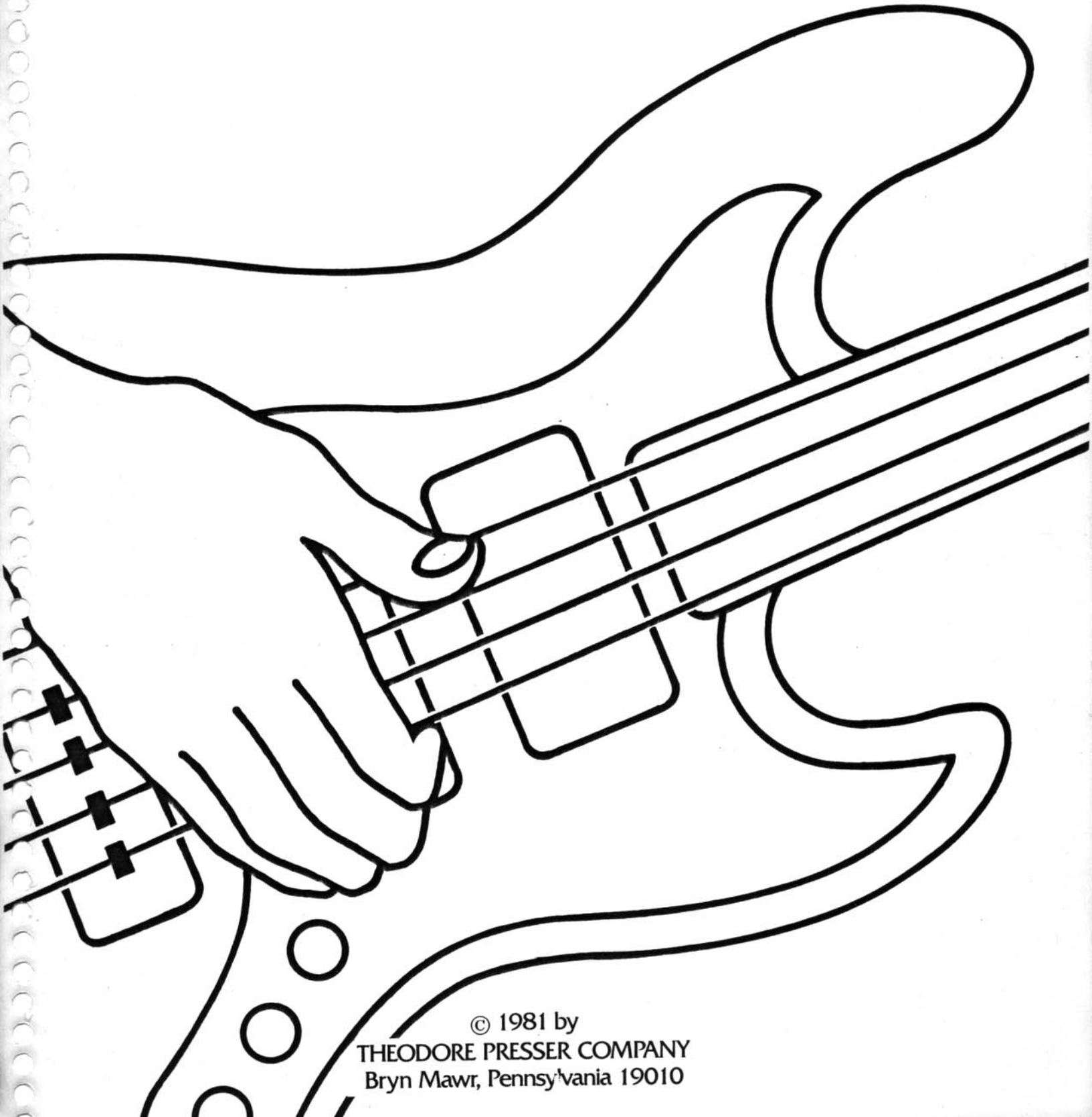
SLAP IT!

Funk Studies for the Electric Bass

by Tony Oppenheim



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Two important additions have been made to SLAP IT! In response to many requests from players using this book, two soundsheets with 63 selected examples from the funk studies are now included. In addition I have added fingerings to the studies.

I hope that these additions will make SLAP IT! even more helpful to you, and I wish you the best of luck in your playing.

TONY OPPENHEIM

Contents

Introduction 1
Open String Exercises 1
Definitions of Special Notation 4
String-Popping Exercises 4
Hammered-On and Lifted-Off Notes 6
Dead Notes 8
Octave Exercises 8
Octaves with Hammered-On Notes 10
Hammered-On Octave Patterns 10
Hammered-On Octave Patterns with Dead Notes 12
Introduction to Slap-Bass Studies 12

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE SOUNDSHEETS

Tune to the A-440 at the beginning of Soundsheet I, Side A. Each example is preceded by an announcer's voice giving the page and example number. These selected examples have been identified in the text of the book.

After either two or four repetitions of each example, the bass pans full to the right channel in order to give you an opportunity to play along with the drums only. Simply turn the balance control on your stereo all the way to the left.

Performed by:

Tony Oppenheim: Bass
Michael Clarke: Drums

Photography by Randy Wallace

Introduction

This book is for any bass player who wishes to learn how to play slap bass. The exercises will help you get started, and the funk studies will develop your feel for this style of playing.

Even bassists who already play slap bass will find this book helpful. I have had quite a few professional bassists as students who were already good slap-bass players. They found that practicing these exercises and bass lines helped them clean-up their sound.

There are many bass lines in this book that you will be able to use when playing. More importantly, knowledge of these bass lines will aid you in developing bass lines of your own.

The most important advice I can give you is NEVER STOP PRACTICING!

Open String Exercises

In the following exercises you will be striking the open strings of the bass with your thumb. The purpose of the exercises is two-fold.

First, you must develop the coordination necessary to accurately strike the string. To develop accuracy it is important to —

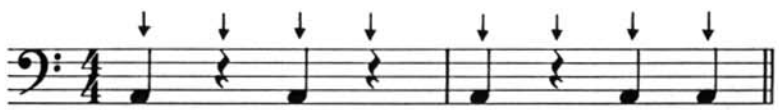
a. control effectively which string you hit;
b. be precise in your rhythm;
c. develop the strength and endurance to play consistently.

These details may seem obvious to you, but executing them may be difficult. Following is an explanation of each detail:

a. Controlling which string you hit is essential if you wish to have a clean sound. At first you will probably have to look at both your thumb and the string in order to accurately strike the string. Your goal in these, and all other exercises in this book, should be to play without looking at your hands. You should, however, look at the music. This will improve your sight-reading and your coordination. I can't emphasize this point enough. It is easy to memorize the exercises, but memorization will not provide the same benefits to your playing as that which can be derived by consistent practice while reading the music.

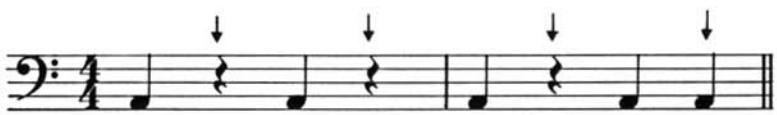
b. The accuracy of your rhythm can be greatly improved by using a metronome when you practice. There will be times when you may think you have mastered an exercise, but playing that exercise with a metronome may reveal inaccuracies. This is a common problem. Often, a student practicing without a metronome will play the easier passages in tempo and then slow down when a more difficult passage is reached. Practicing in this manner accomplishes nothing. You can use a metronome in many ways. For the purposes of these exercises I will recommend a couple that are appropriate. The first is just using the metronome to provide the standard on-the-beat click. This means that you select a tempo and then set the metronome to click out every beat in a measure at that tempo. Here is an illustration of that method:

(Arrows indicate where metronome clicks would be.)



Another way to use your metronome is to set the click to the off-beats. This helps you to develop a feel for the back-beat of the music (which in funk is essential). This is an illustration of that technique:

(Arrows indicate where metronome clicks would be.)



c. The development of strength and endurance. In order to play with accuracy it is necessary to develop the muscles in your right arm. Now I don't mean that you should go out and start pumping iron, but it is important to practice in a manner that will contribute to your overall playing ability. It isn't enough to be able to correctly play the licks and exercises once or twice. You should work on repetition of the patterns as well. A bass player is often called upon to play ostinato parts that may repeat, unchanged, for five minutes or more (especially in funk). So you can see why I am emphasizing this point.

The second purpose of the exercises is to develop the tone quality. When you hit a string with your thumb, listen carefully to the sound produced. A few things to listen for are —

a. is the fundamental pitch strong?
b. is there a percussive attack?
c. does the note sustain well?

Those three attributes are essential to produce a good sound. It is important to understand how to be sure the sound has all these qualities.

a. A good way to be sure that you are getting a strong fundamental pitch is to compare the sound when plucking an open string with the sound produced by striking that same open string with your thumb. There will, of course, be a difference in tone. The sound produced by your thumb may be brighter and more percussive, but it will also tend to be thinner. You should work to get as much of the fullness and depth of the plucked sound into the slapped sound.

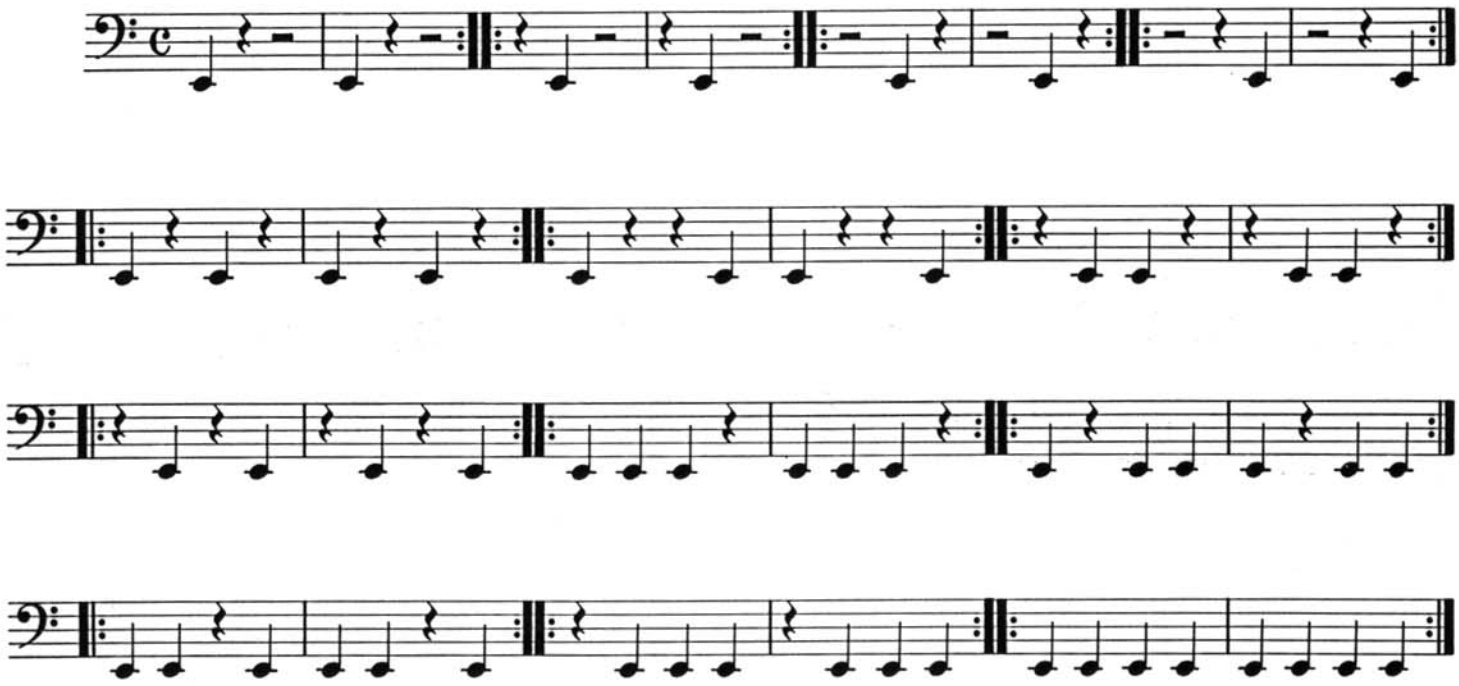
b. A percussive attack is characteristic of slap-bass playing. This percussive sound is produced by the string striking the fingerboard and frets of the bass, not by how hard you hit the string. You must strike the string firmly and accurately, but it isn't necessary to smash it!

c. A good sustaining note can be the most difficult thing to control. While it is very important to have the ability to sustain notes, it is more important to be able to control that sustained sound. One of the major problems involved with the recording of slap bass is background noise. If you are not always in control of the sounds coming from your instrument, you will almost certainly receive complaints from engineers and producers about background noise in your sound. There are several ways to control the amount of sustain of a given note. For instance, in many situations you may simply lay the fingers of your left hand across the strings at the instant you wish to mute the strings. This is a technique you probably use already in your everyday playing. Another muting technique which works well with slap-bass playing involves the heel of the right hand. You will be striking the strings of the bass with your thumb on what I will call the down-stroke (see Fig. 1). On the up-stroke you can allow the heel of your right hand to touch the strings just enough to mute them (see Fig. 2). With a little practice this can be a very effective muting technique.

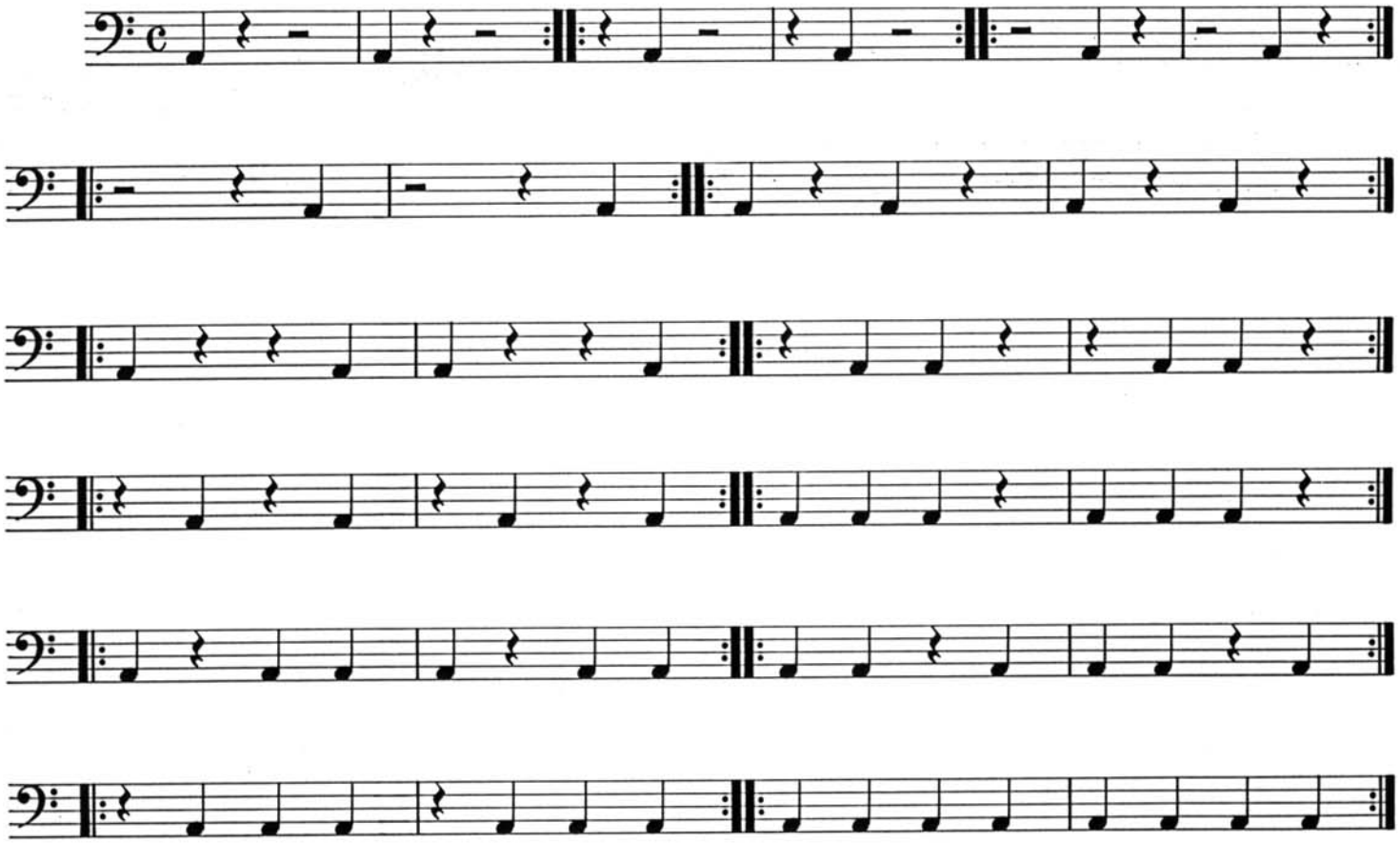
Fig. 1

Fig. 2

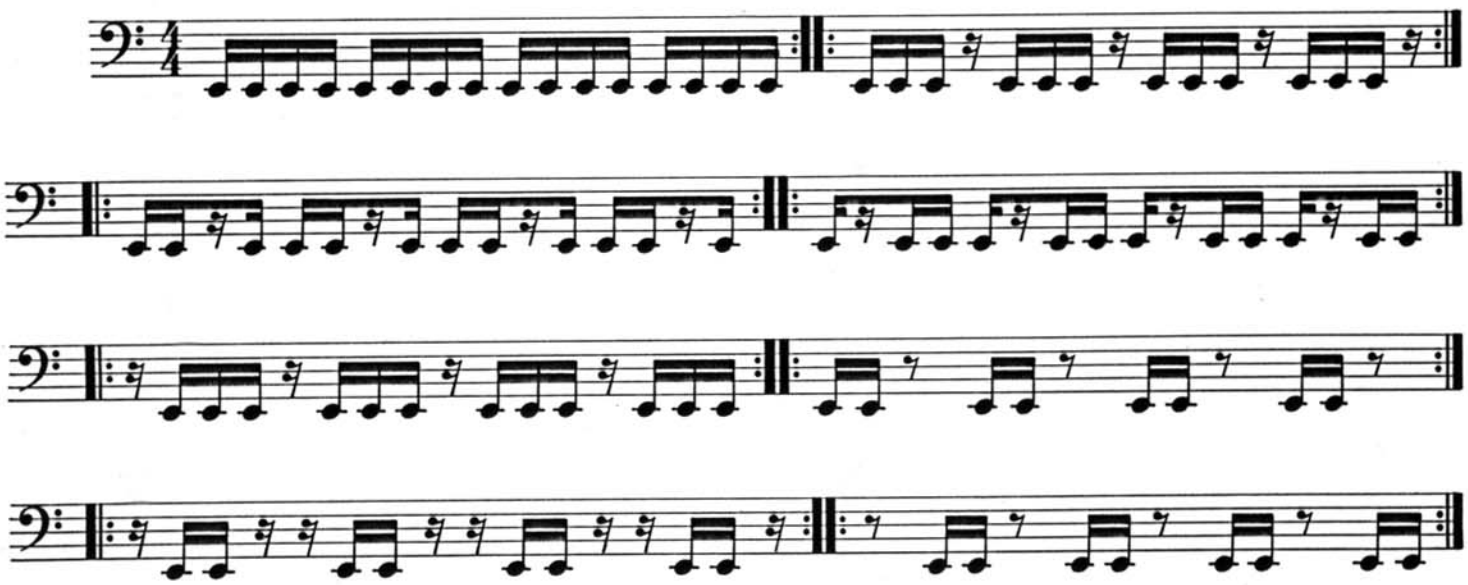
This exercise should be practiced as written without stopping between sections. ALWAYS USE A METRONOME!

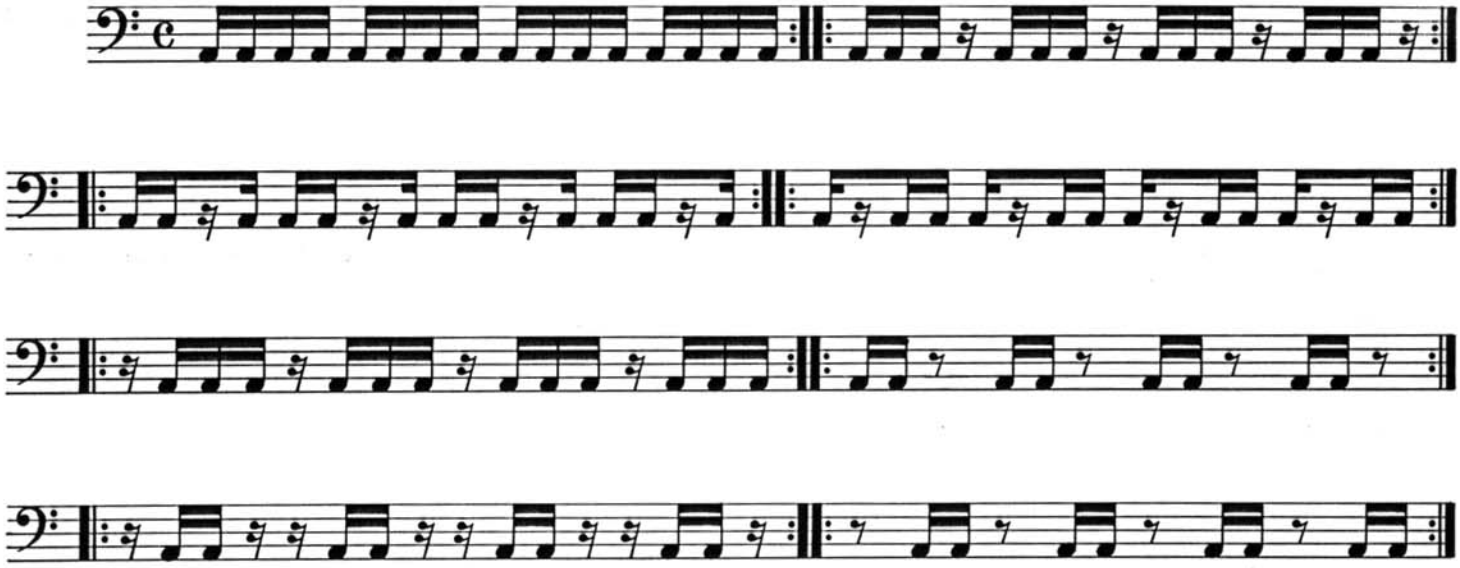


This exercise should be practiced the same way as the previous exercise, except now be careful to strike only the A string.



At first, these next two exercises may look more difficult than they are. Don't let all the sixteenth notes worry you. The purpose of these exercises is to familiarize you with sixteenth-note rhythms. They should not be played quickly at first. You should practice these exercises at a tempo that will allow you to play the rhythms accurately without stopping between the different sections. What you are trying to develop here is the ability to interchange these rhythms, so it is important that you practice all the sections at the same tempo at any given time (gradually increasing the tempo as you improve). For the greatest degree of accuracy, when you begin these exercises set your metronome to click eighth notes at whatever tempo you have selected (i.e., if you were to select the tempo of 60 beats per minute, and the quarter note gets one beat, then you would set the metronome at 120 beats per minute for an eighth note to get one click).



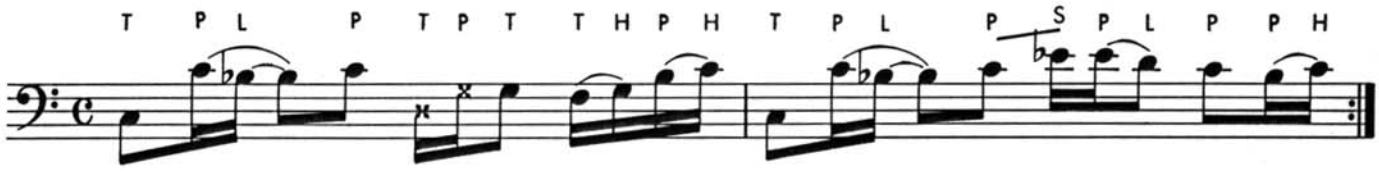


Definitions of Special Notation

Up until this point in the book you have only been striking the strings of the bass with your thumb. As you progress through this book you will be using many different articulation techniques. For example, you will be using the first finger of your right hand to pop the strings, and you will be using the fingers of your left hand to create hammered-on notes (to be defined later). Since there is no established form of notation for these and other techniques taught in this book, I have developed my own symbols. They are as follows:

T = thumb H = hammered-on L = lifted-off
P = popped S = slide

You will see these symbols throughout the book. They are used to give you the most accurate indication of how I intended a particular passage to be played. This is how they are used:



Notice that every note that is articulated has a letter above it. The letter indicates to you which articulation technique is used to play that note.

In addition to my own symbols, all the exercises and bass lines in the book have the proper standard notation. My notation is only a guide, developed for the purposes of this book. You will not find it in professional charts. So it is important that you develop a feel for interpretation of standard notation as well.

String-Popping Exercises

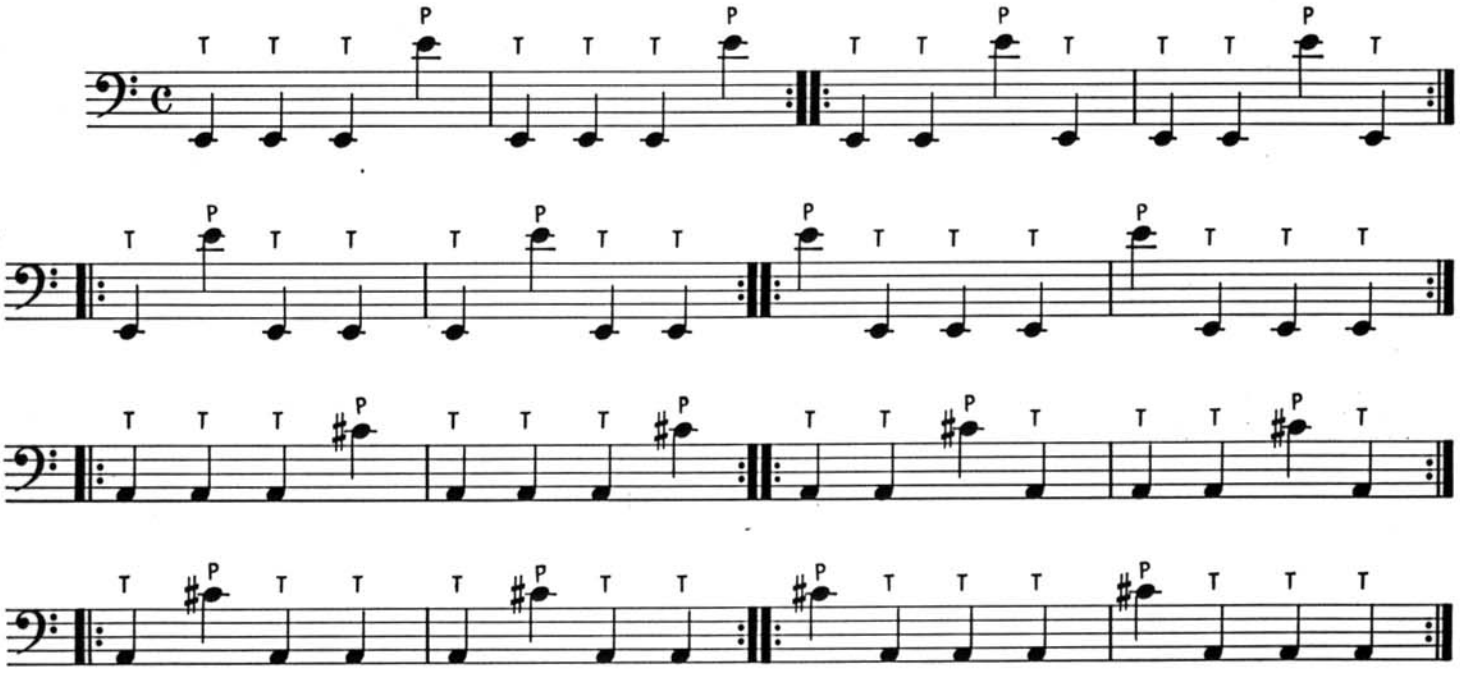
The most distinctive part of the slap-bass sound, oddly enough, is not necessarily the slap sound. It is the sound produced by popping the strings of the bass with the fingers of your right hand. I've already indicated that the percussive quality of the slap comes from the string striking the fingerboard and frets of the bass. The same applies to the popped string sound, except that it can be even more percussive. This is because the string is pulled away from the fingerboard and then released. When released the string snaps back with great force against the fingerboard and frets. This attack is quicker and more violent than the attack produced by your thumb. As a result, the sound produced is more percussive.

You'll notice that even in these first popping exercises I have combined the first technique you worked on (open strings slapped with your thumb) with string popping. This is because right from the start you should get a feel for alternating between the two.

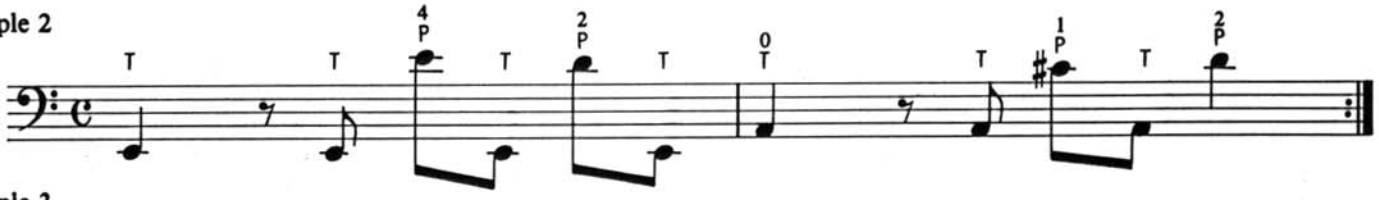
I suggest that you use your first finger to pop the strings. The best way to facilitate alternation between your thumb and first finger is to make sure that your first finger touches the bass each time your thumb hits a string (see Fig. 1). This way your first finger will be in position on every up-stroke to pop a string (see Fig. 3). As you practice the exercises you will develop a feel for this. Please take it easy at first; it is possible to develop some nasty blisters if you overdo it!

Fig. 3

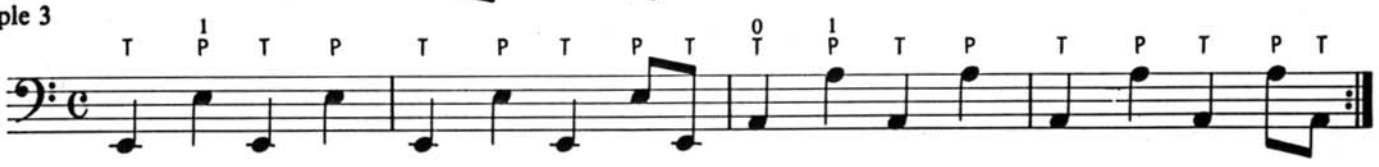
When practicing these exercises let your wrist do the work involved in popping the string, not your finger. Use the up-stroke to pop the string with your first finger, and the down-stroke to slap the string with your thumb. DON'T FORGET TO USE A METRONOME!



Example 2



Example 3

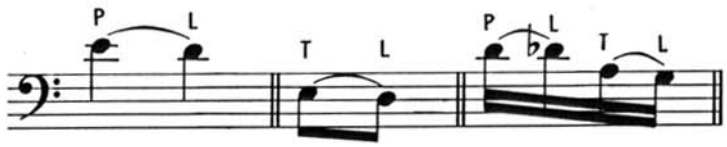


Hammered-On and Lifted-Off Notes

A hammered-on note is any note that is played with the left hand, without any articulation from the right hand. Here are some examples:

Notice that a hammered-on note can be any kind of note on any string, and that when a hammered-on note is preceded by a note articulated by the right hand, those notes are connected with a slur.

A variation on the hammered-on note is the lifted-off note. It is much the same as the hammered-on note, because again there is no articulation in the right hand to create the lifted-off note. Here are some examples:



Notice that the lifted-off note is always preceded by an articulated note on the same string. The note is created when you lift off one finger of your left hand leaving another finger on the same string behind it still fretting a note. If done quickly the string will continue to vibrate and the lifted-off note will ring.

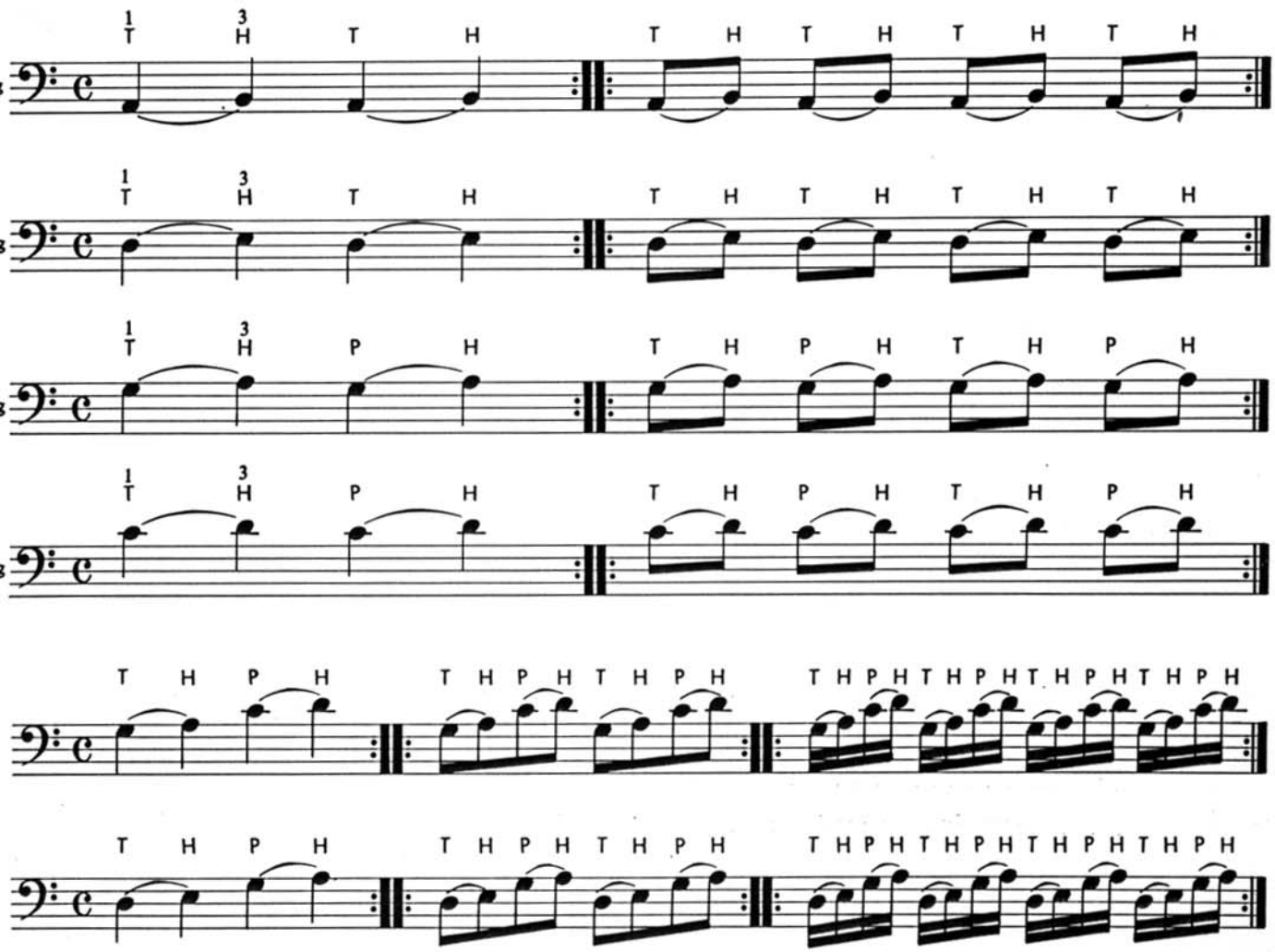
The following exercises will help you develop your ability to play hammered-on and lifted-off notes. When practicing these exercises, be sure to try to make your notes as even as possible. One of the inherent problems of hammered-on and lifted-off notes is that, since they are not aided by the articulation of the right hand, they tend to be a little weaker. This problem can be almost entirely eliminated through practice, so keep working.

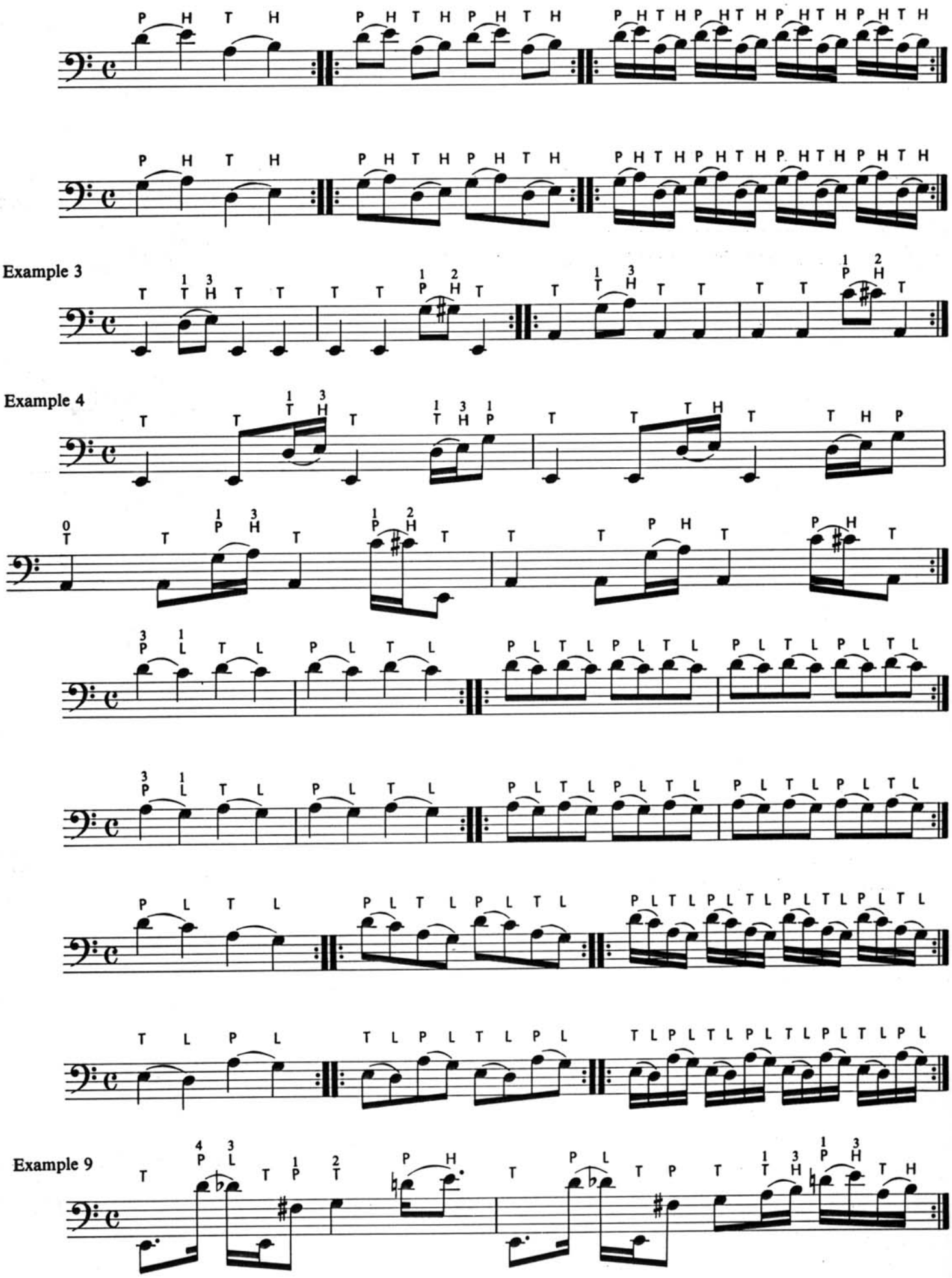
E string

A string

D string

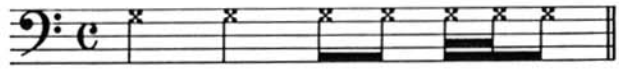
G string



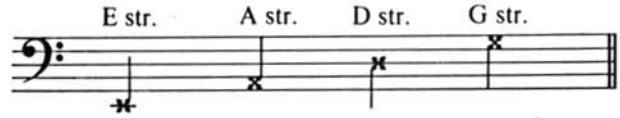

Example 3
Example 4
Example 9

Dead Notes

Dead notes, as they are related to slap-bass playing, can be defined as notes which add to the rhythmic content of the music but have no distinguishable pitch. They are created by striking a string with the fingers of either hand while holding the string mute. This creates a percussive sound (click) which is very much a part of the slap-bass sound. Since these notes have no pitch they are notated differently than regular notes. In this book you will find dead notes notated in the following manner:

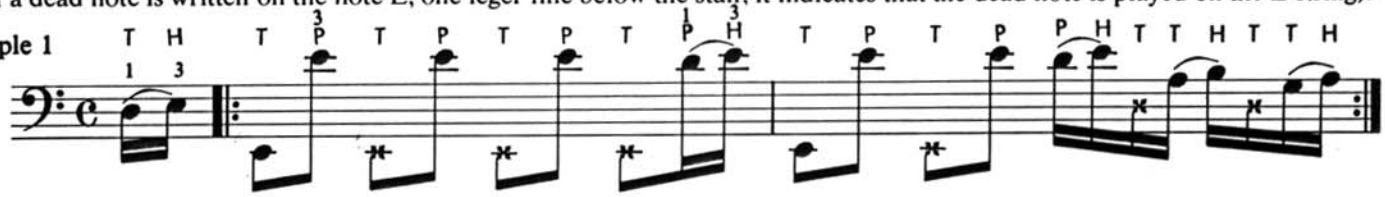


Notice that the normal round head of the note is replaced by an x. In addition, throughout this book you will see only four different dead notes notated:



Notice that each of the dead notes corresponds with a string on the bass. This is to indicate on which string a dead note is played (i.e., if a dead note is written on the note E, one leger line below the staff, it indicates that the dead note is played on the E string).

Example 1

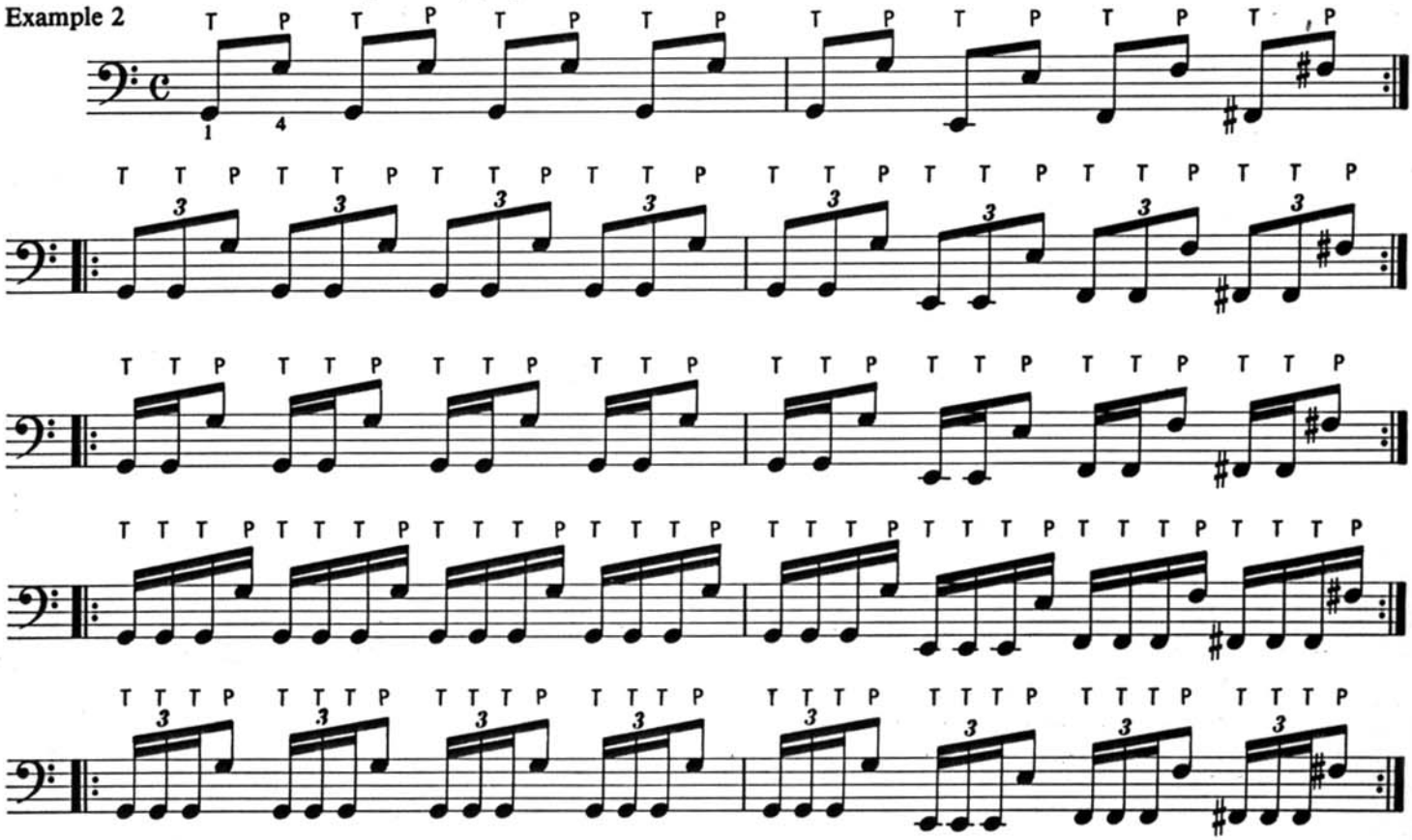


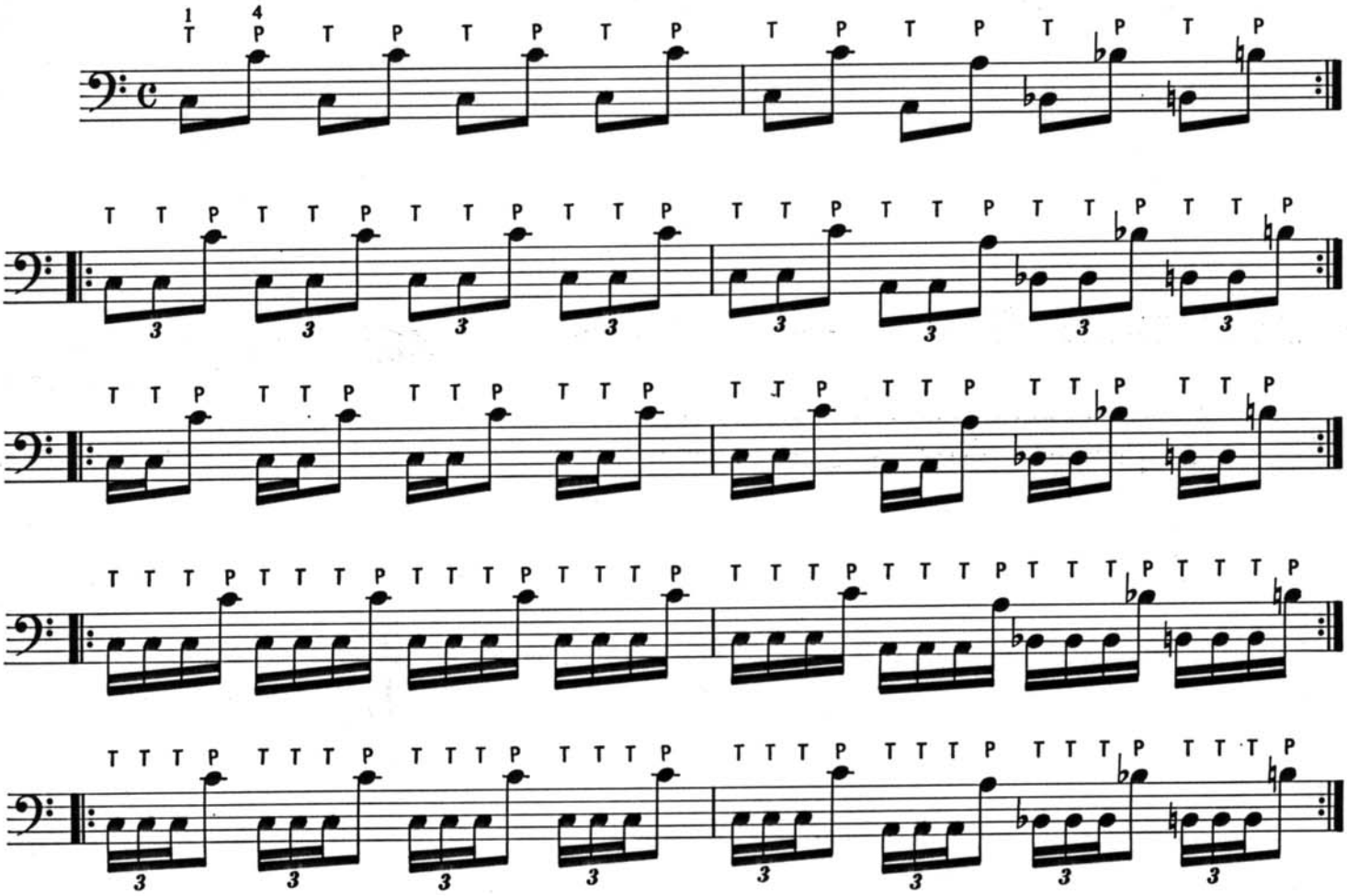
Octave Exercises

One of the most commonly used figures in slap-bass playing is the octave pattern. This is because octave patterns combine basic harmonic movement with a strong rhythmic foundation. In other words, they help keep everyone "in-the-pocket."

Since octave lines are so simple, many players take them for granted. In order to be played properly, they must be practiced!

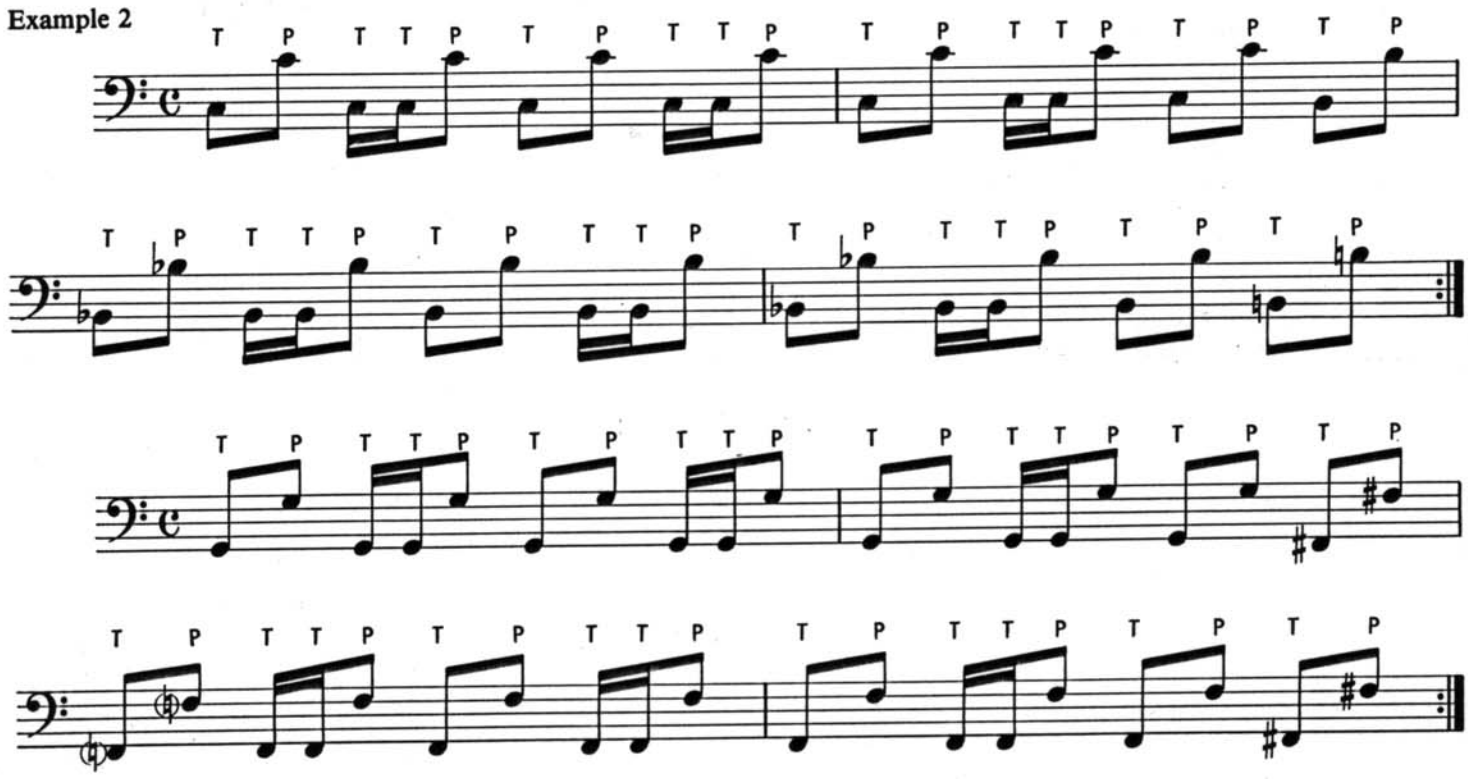
Example 2





Along with the important function octaves will have in your funk playing, practicing them will help develop skills necessary to play the more difficult lines in this book. Learning to play octaves is the first step in developing the ability to alternate fluidly between striking a string with your thumb and popping a string with your finger. This skill is essential to your progress.

Example 2

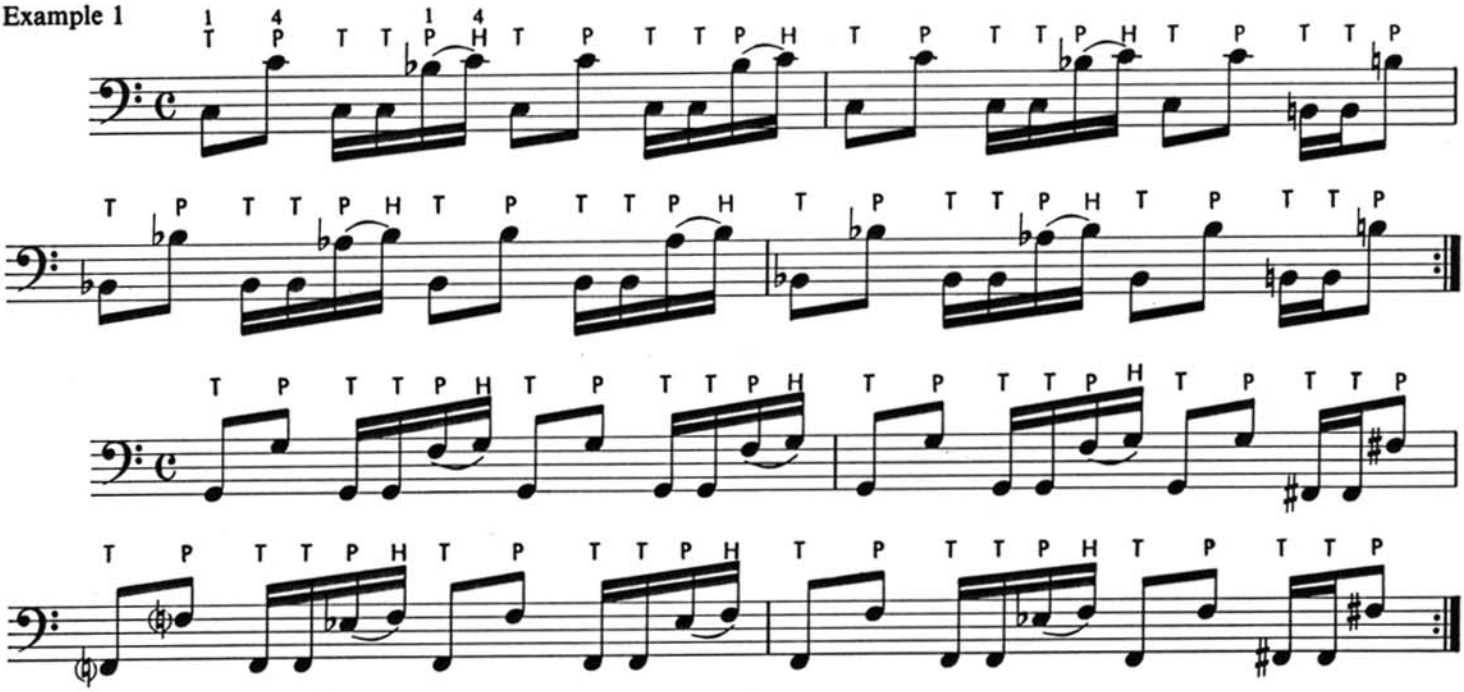


Before proceeding to the next section, be sure that you are comfortable with the previous exercises.

Octaves with Hammered-On Notes

The following octave patterns are an excellent variation on the last patterns you were given. Notice how the extra notes, added through the use of hammered-on notes, add to the implied motion of the pattern.

Example 1



Hammered-On Octave Patterns

The following exercises are octave patterns that incorporate cross-string hammering.

A cross-string hammer is the same as any other hammered-on note in all ways, except that it is not played on the same string as the note immediately preceding it. The cross-string hammer is articulated entirely by the left hand (see Figs. 4 and 5).

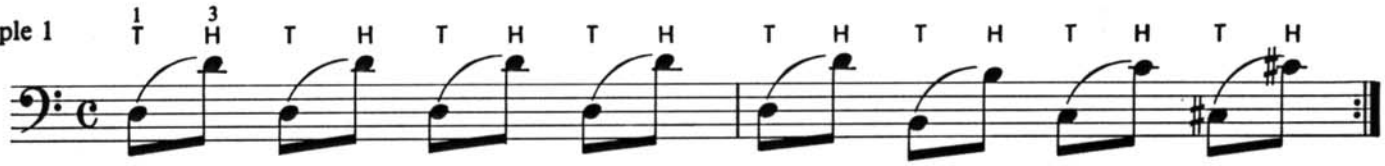
Fig. 4

Fig. 5

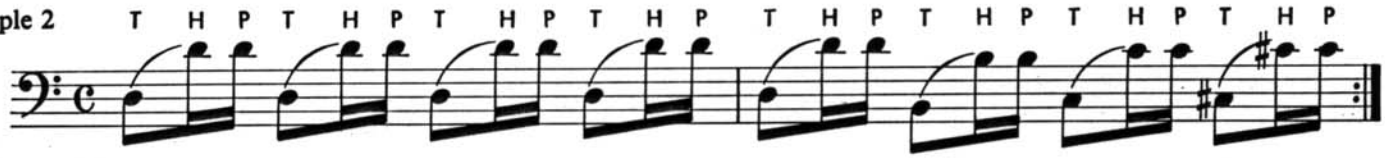
Here are some examples:

In this group of exercises we will deal only with cross-string hammers in octave patterns. However, throughout the book you will find many examples of cross-string hammers. Practicing these patterns will prepare you for those bass lines.

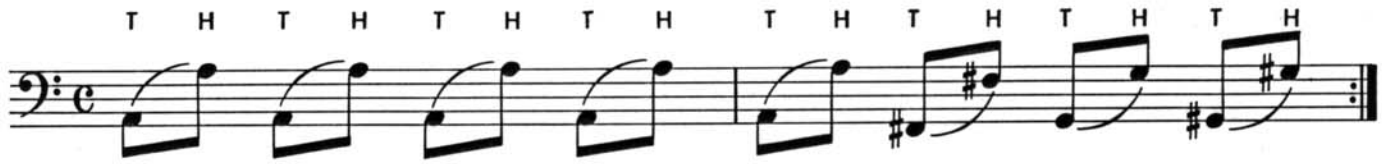
Example 1

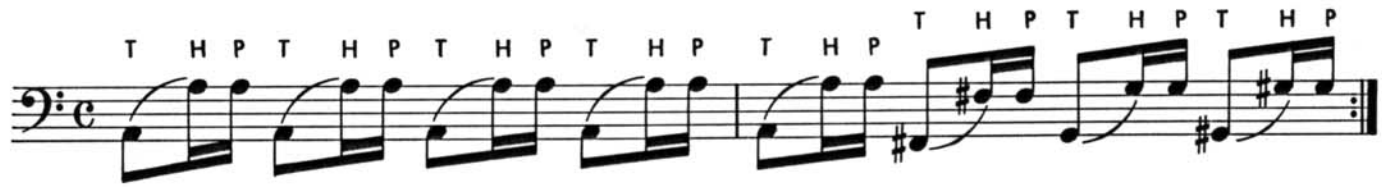


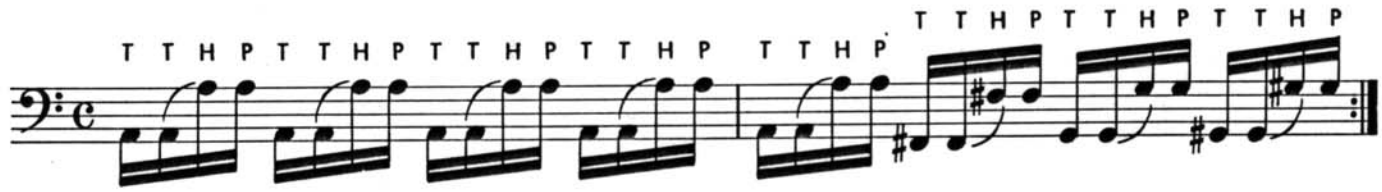
Example 2

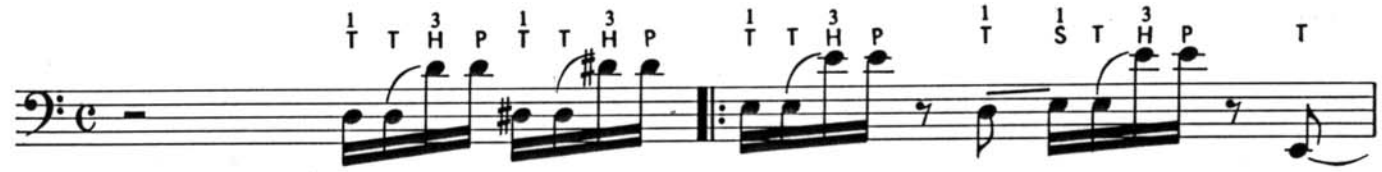


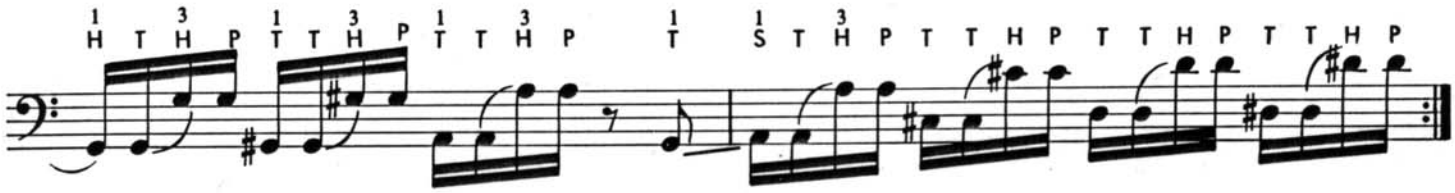
Example 3







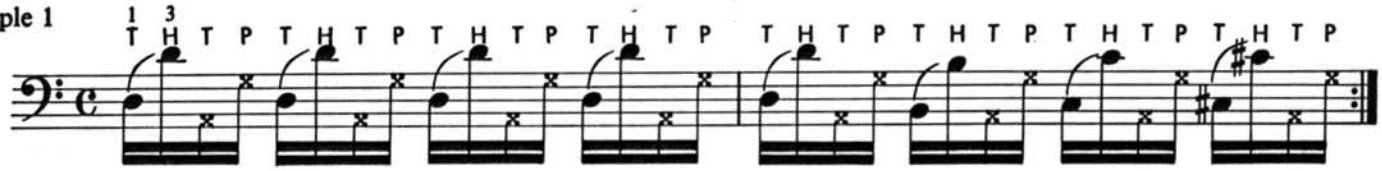


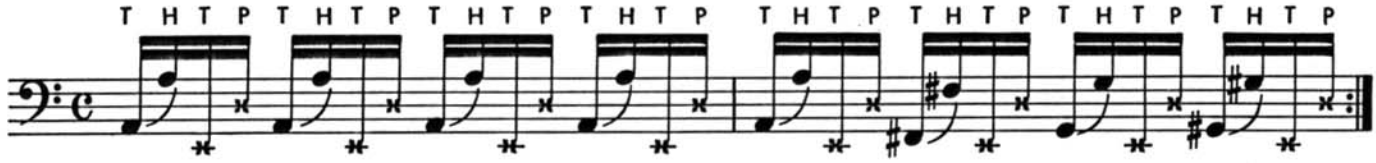


Hammered-On Octave Patterns with Dead Notes

The following octave patterns combine cross-string hammering with dead notes. You will find they have a very different feel than the octave patterns with only the cross-string hammering included.

Example 1





Example 4

Introduction to Slap-Bass Studies

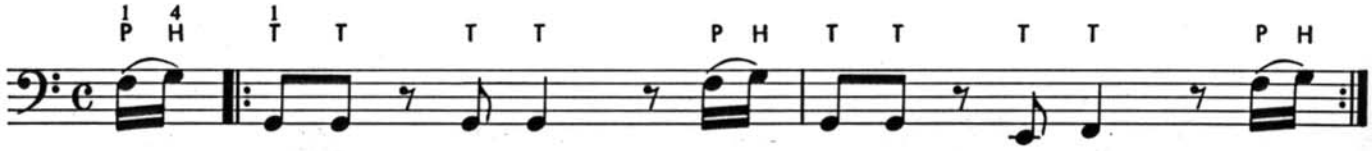
From this point on you will find dozens of short patterns (licks) which will help further develop your feel for slap-bass playing. The exercises continue in progressive order so that as you move through them your technique should improve. Be sure you have mastered each one before moving on. This takes a lot of practice and patience.

Have fun with these licks. Once you are able to play them as written, change them around to fit your own style of playing. Try them in different keys.

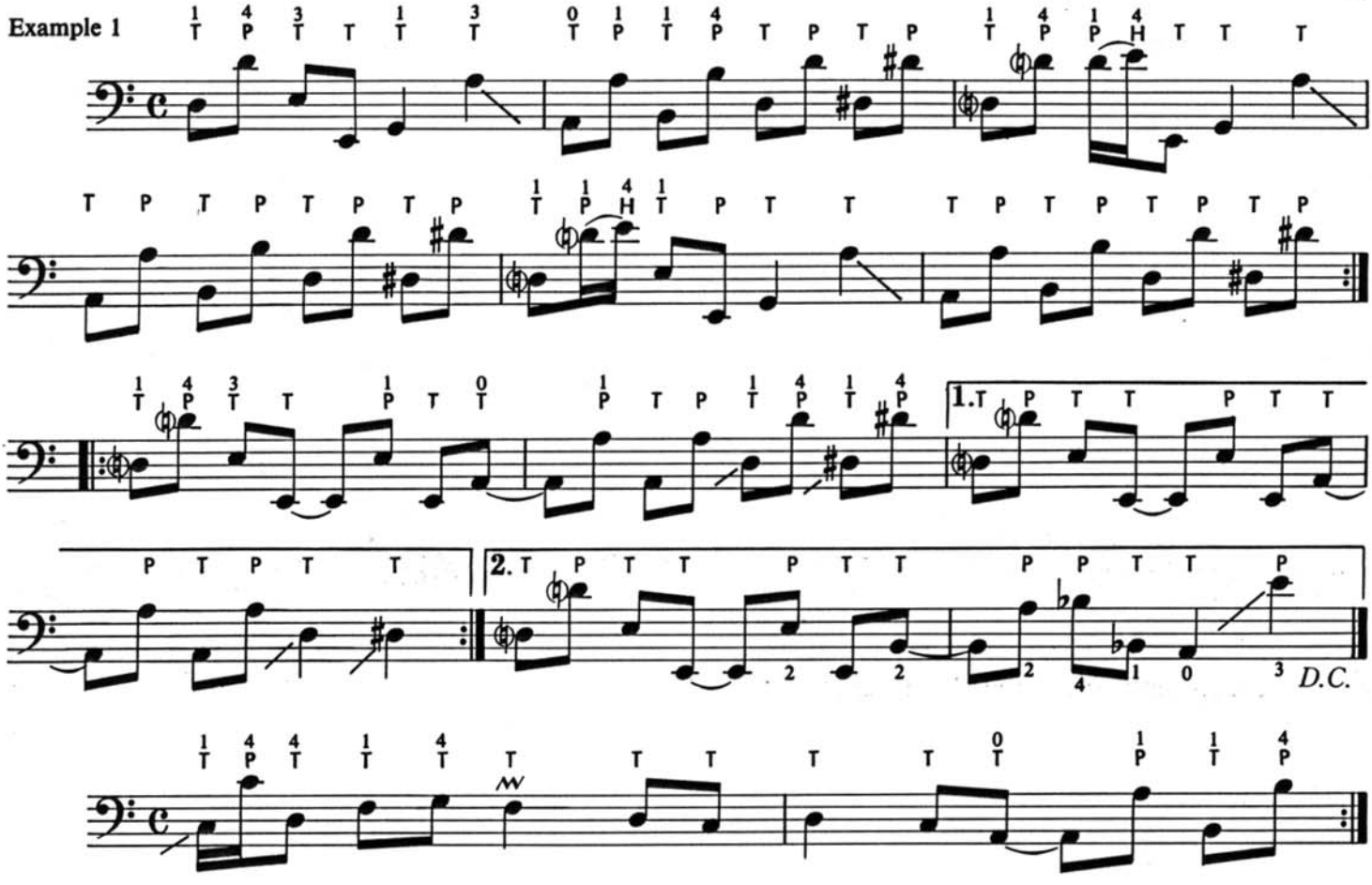
I also suggest that you start a notebook of bass lines. As you learn this material, try to come up with your own bass lines. If you make up a line that you like, write it down. Over a period of time you can collect lots of good ideas which you otherwise might have forgotten. In addition, writing out your own lines will improve your sight-reading ability.

I hope you will enjoy the lines I have included in the book. They are a selection of the best bass lines from my personal music notebook.

Whatever you do DON'T STOP PRACTICING!



Example 1



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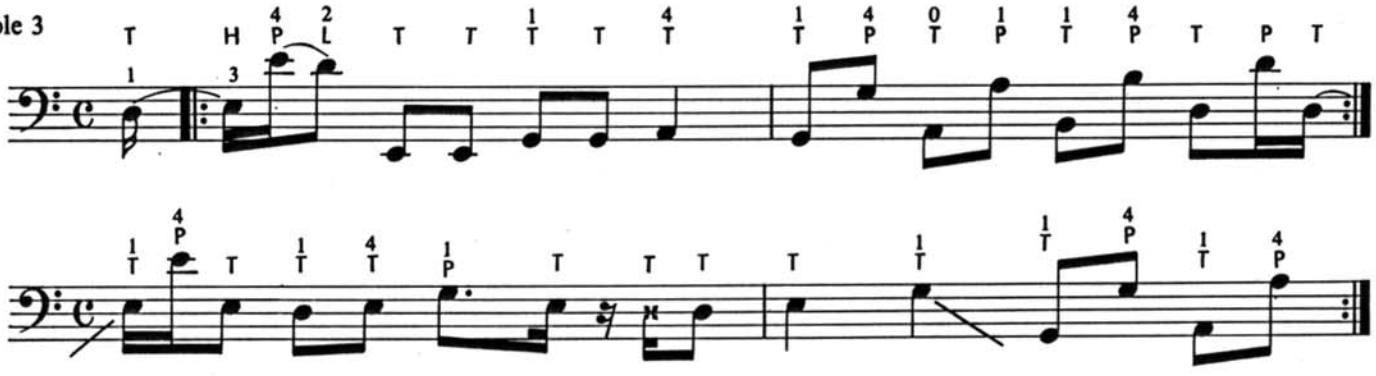

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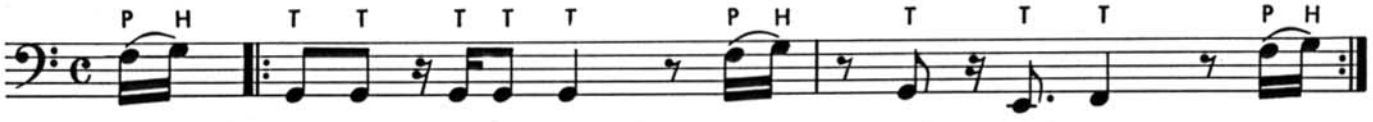

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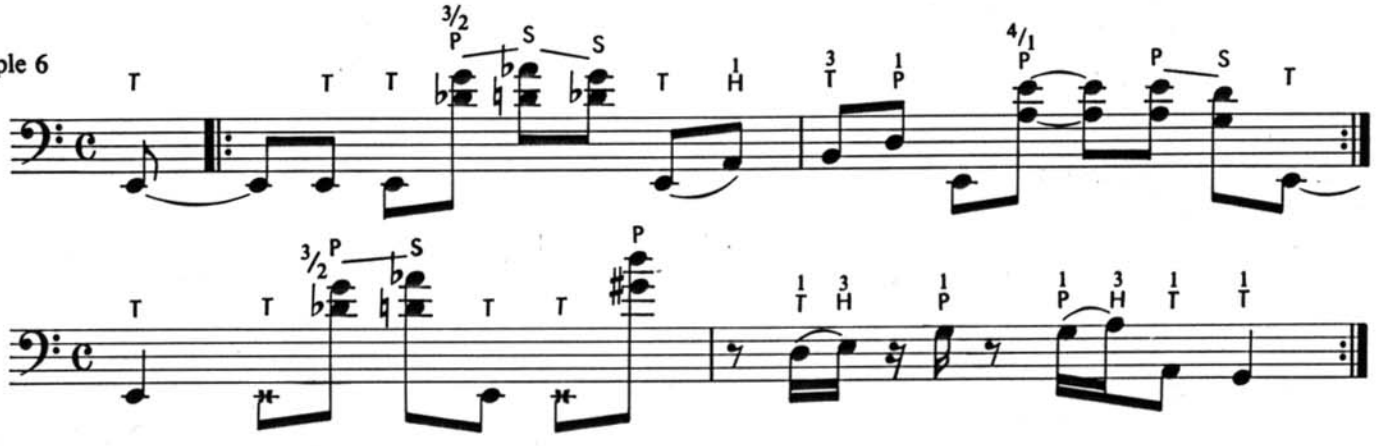

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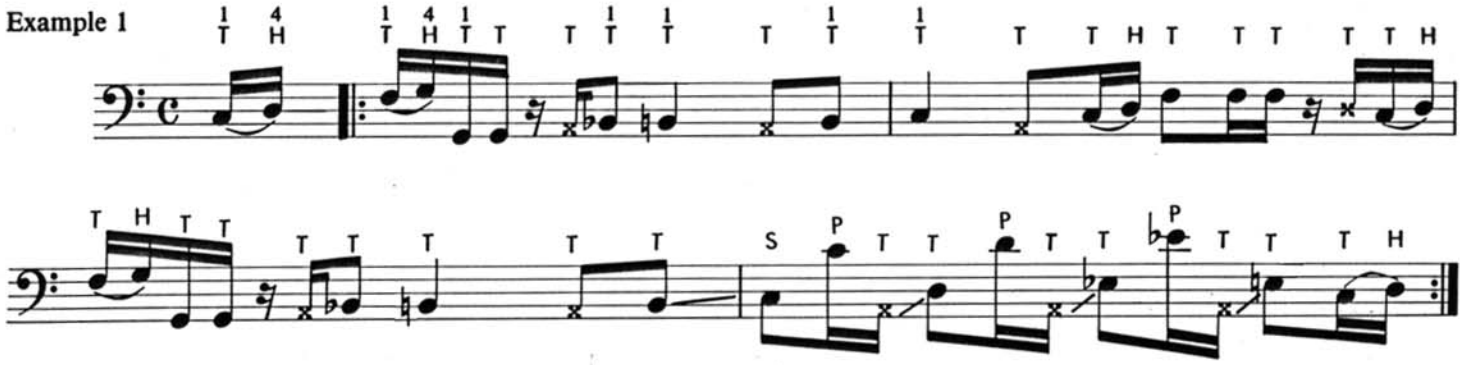

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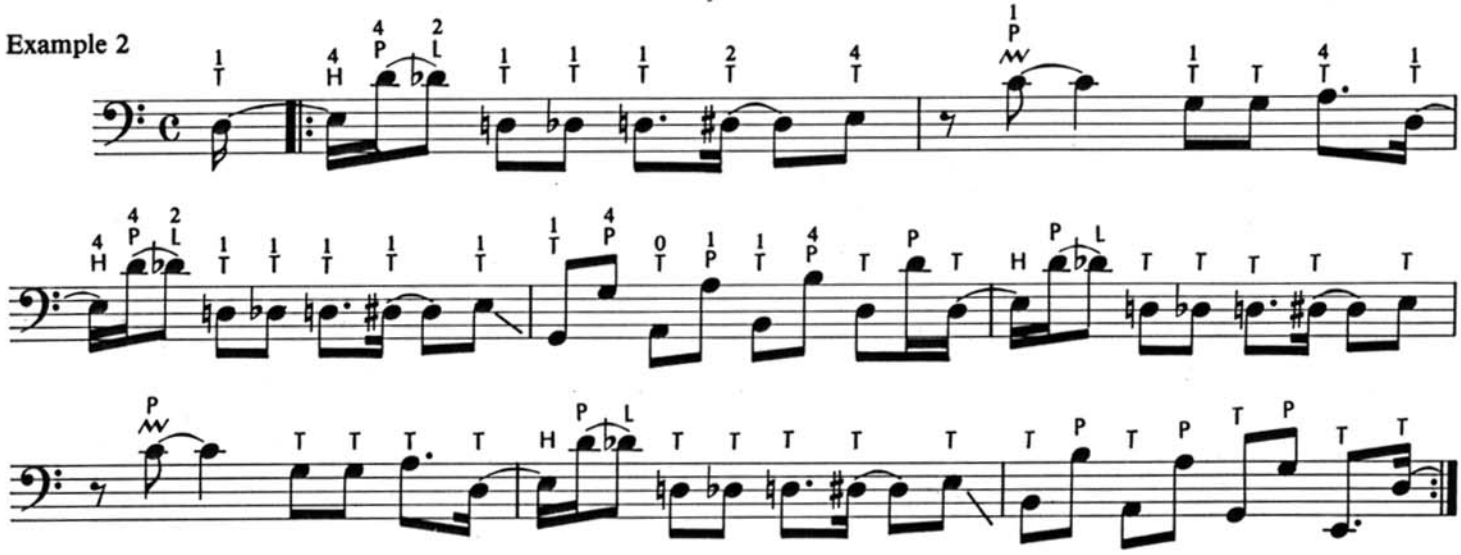

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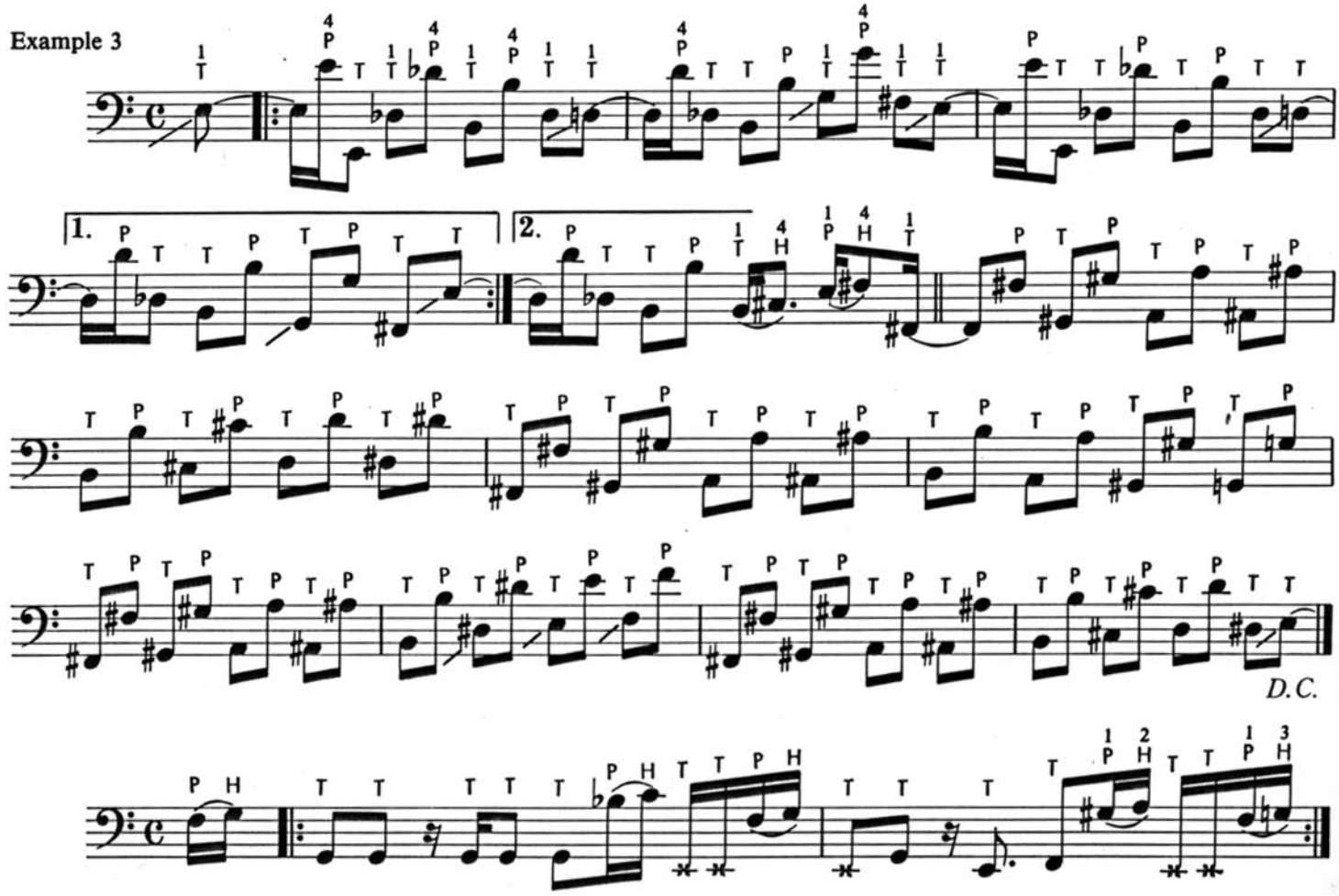

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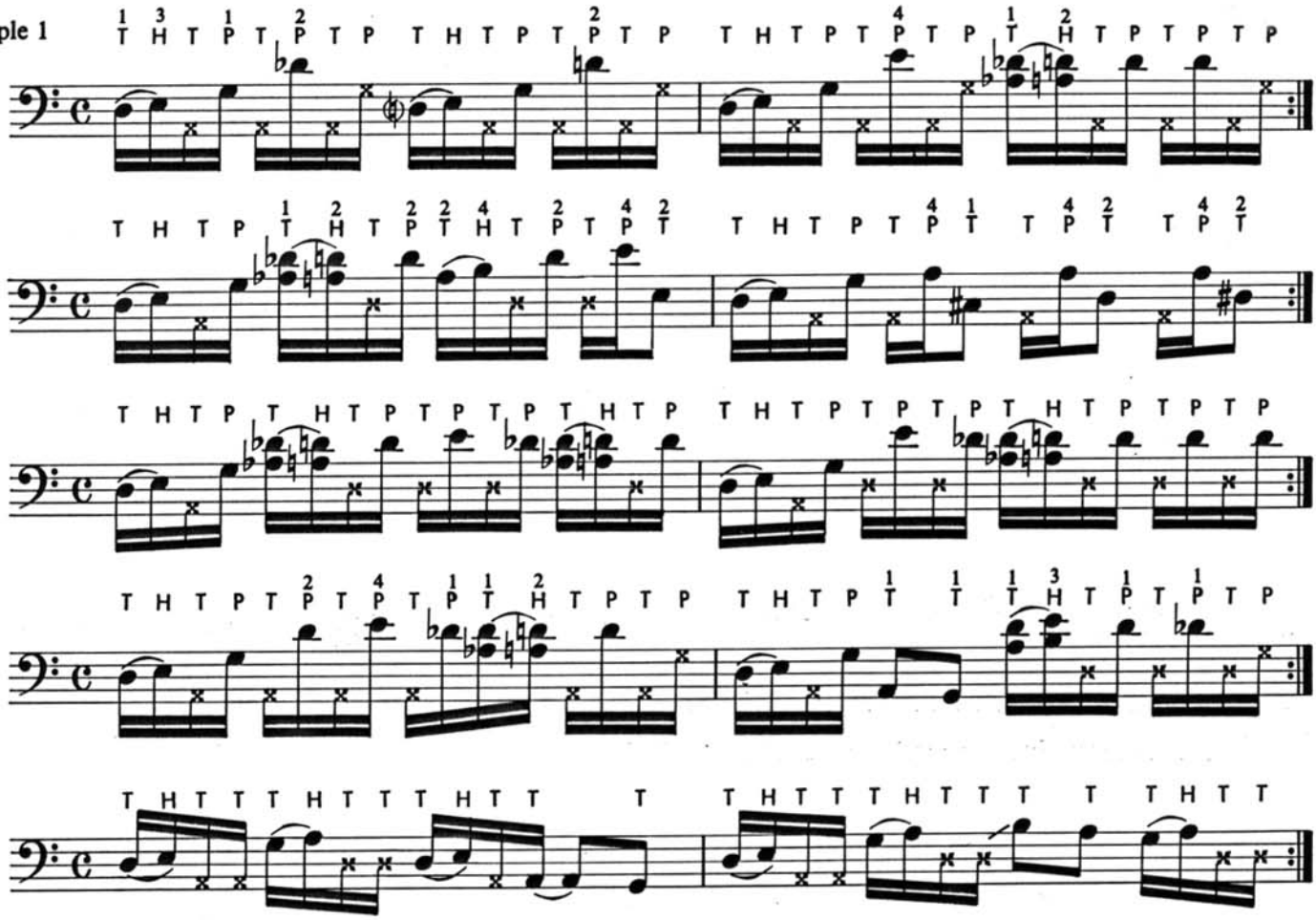

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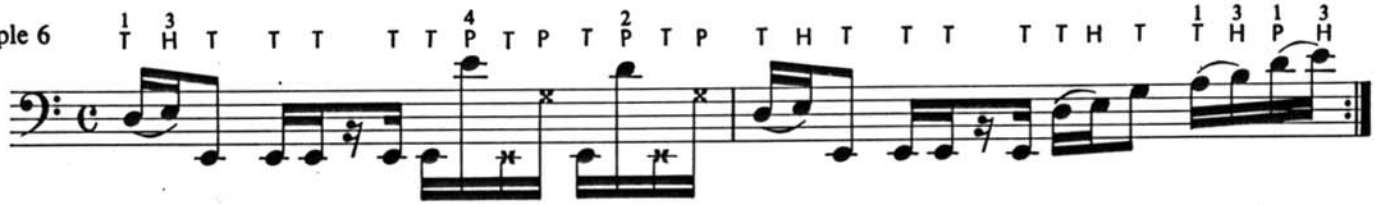

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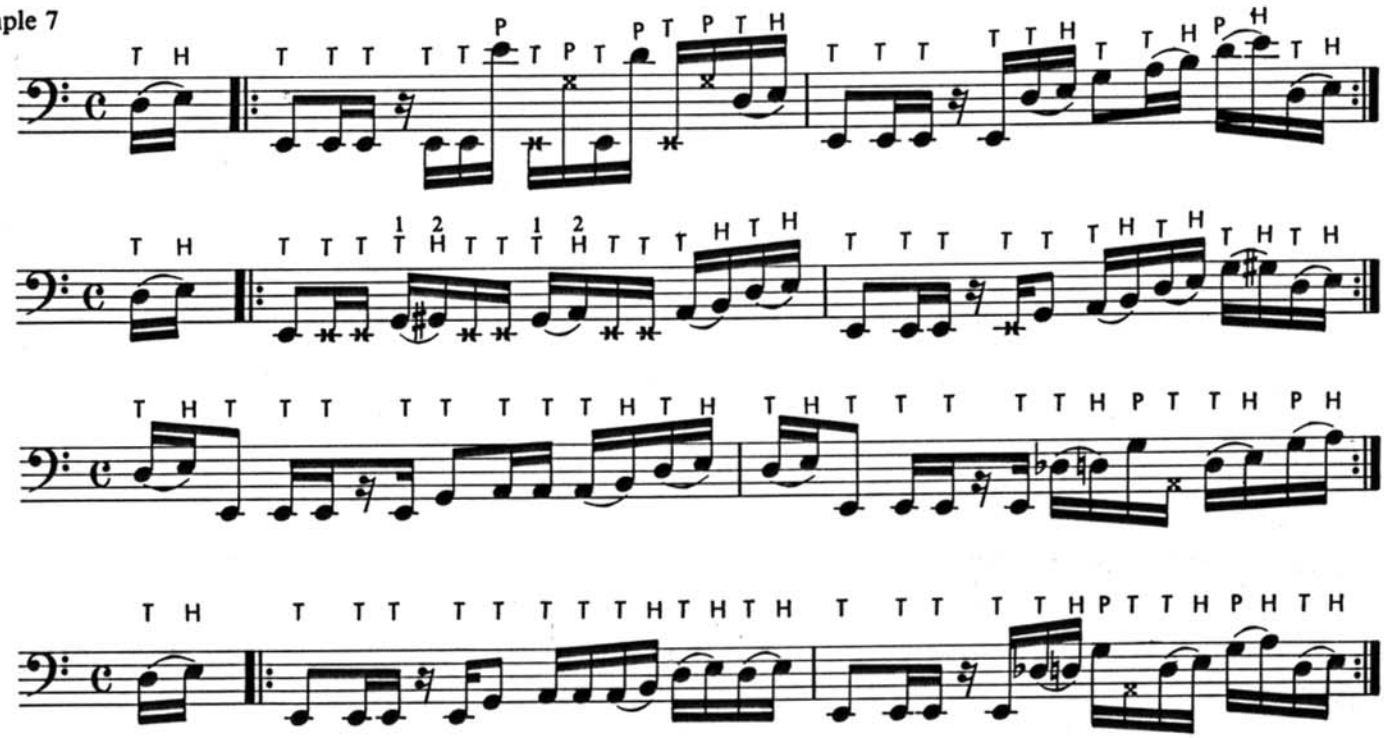
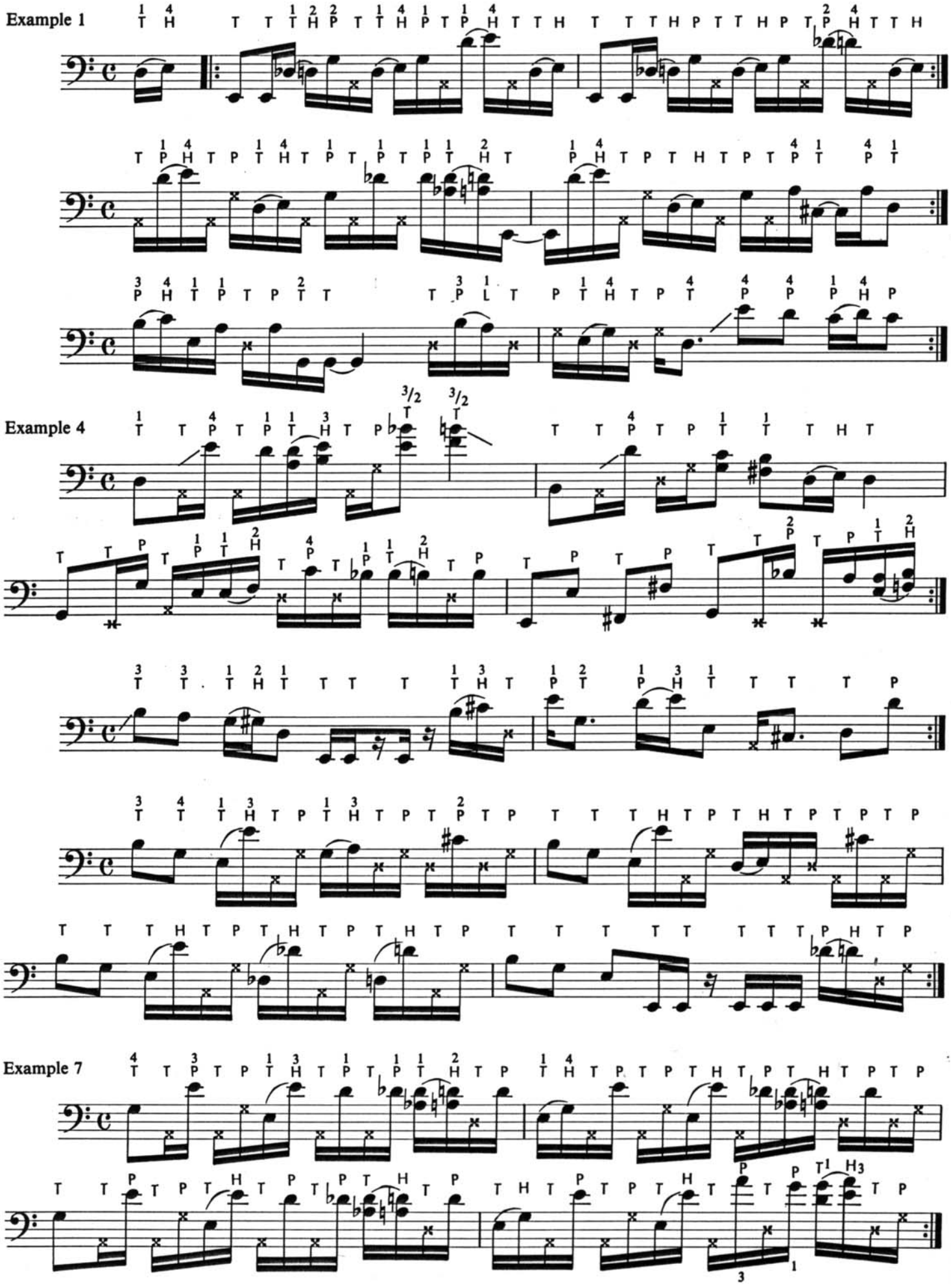
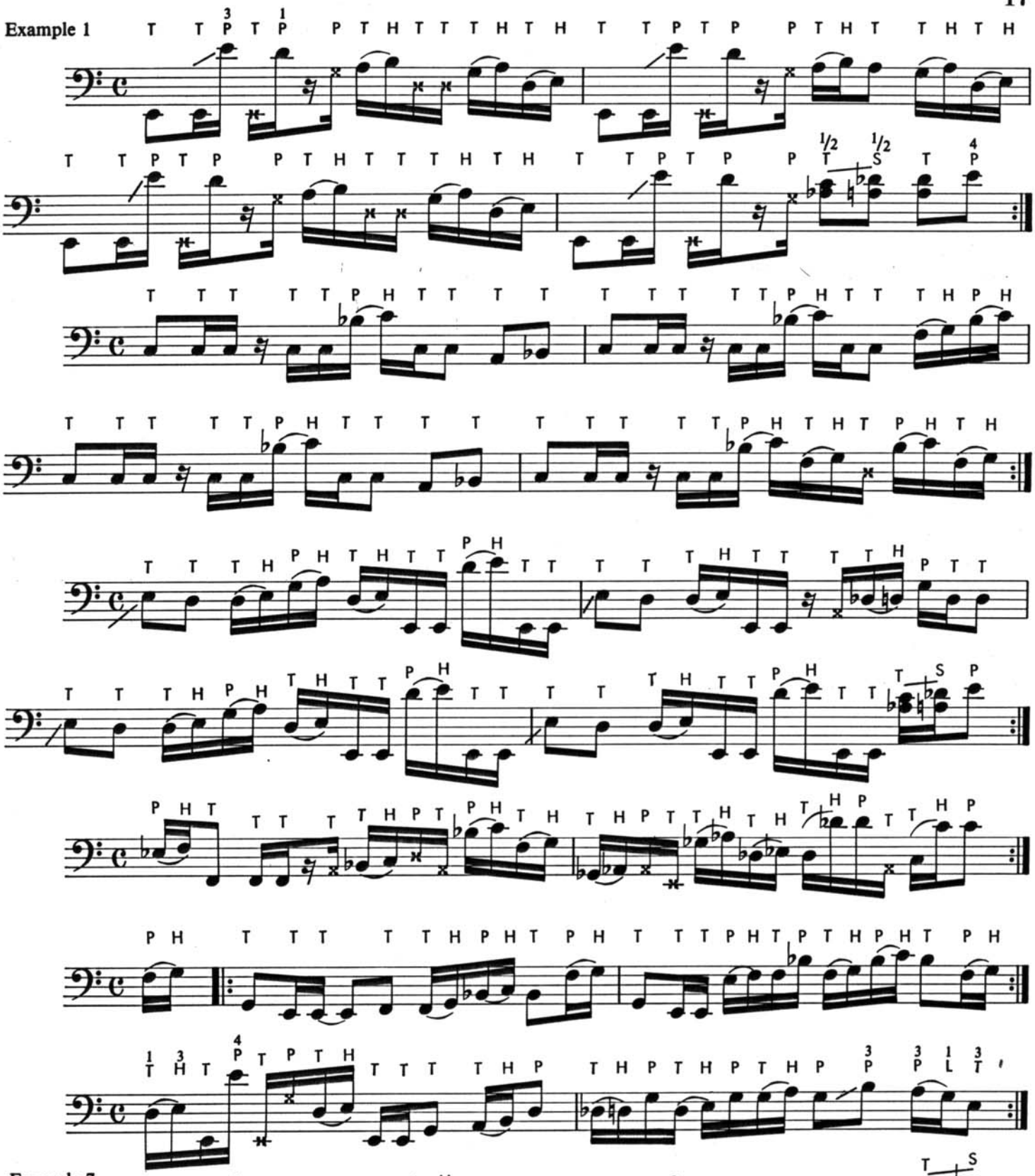



Example 1
Example 4
Example 7

Example 1



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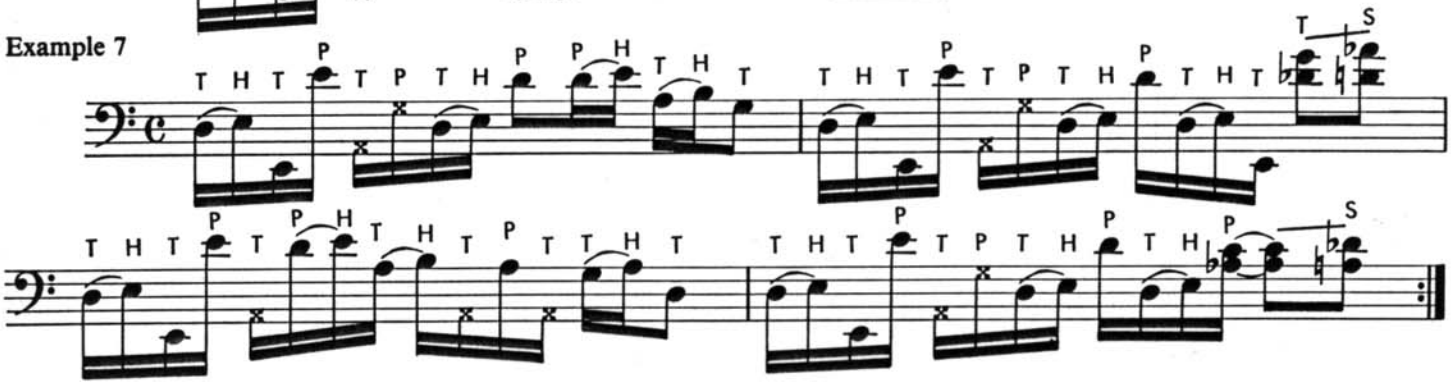

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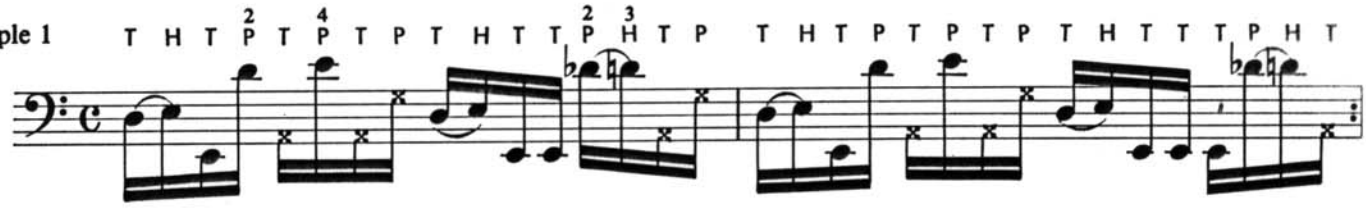

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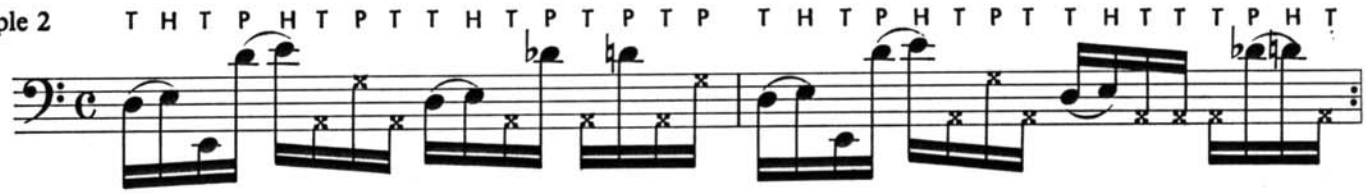

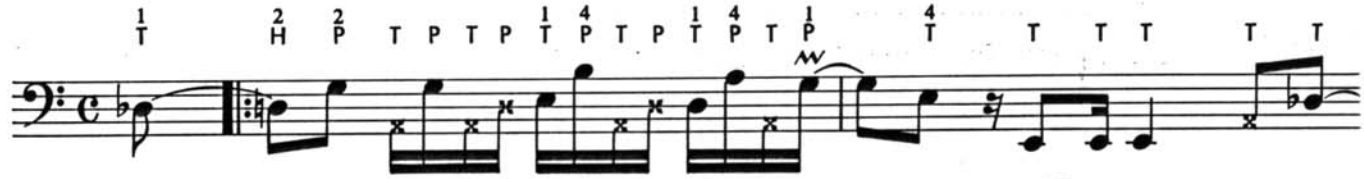

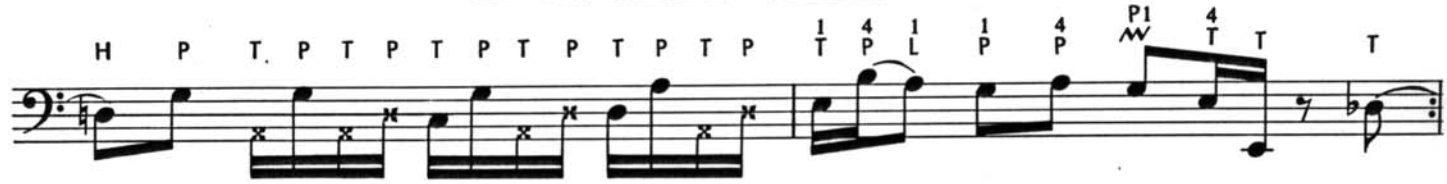

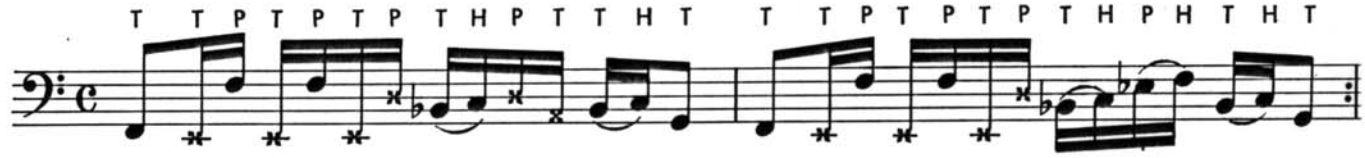

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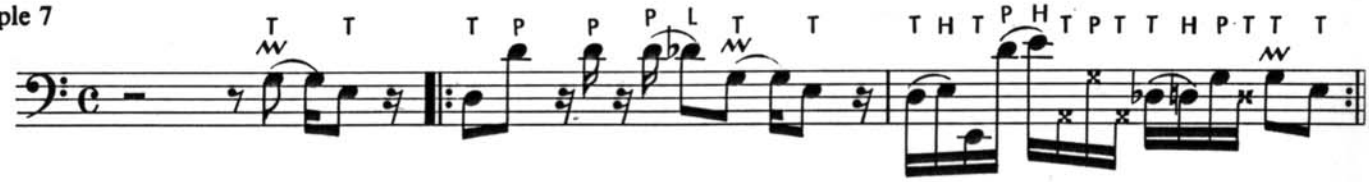

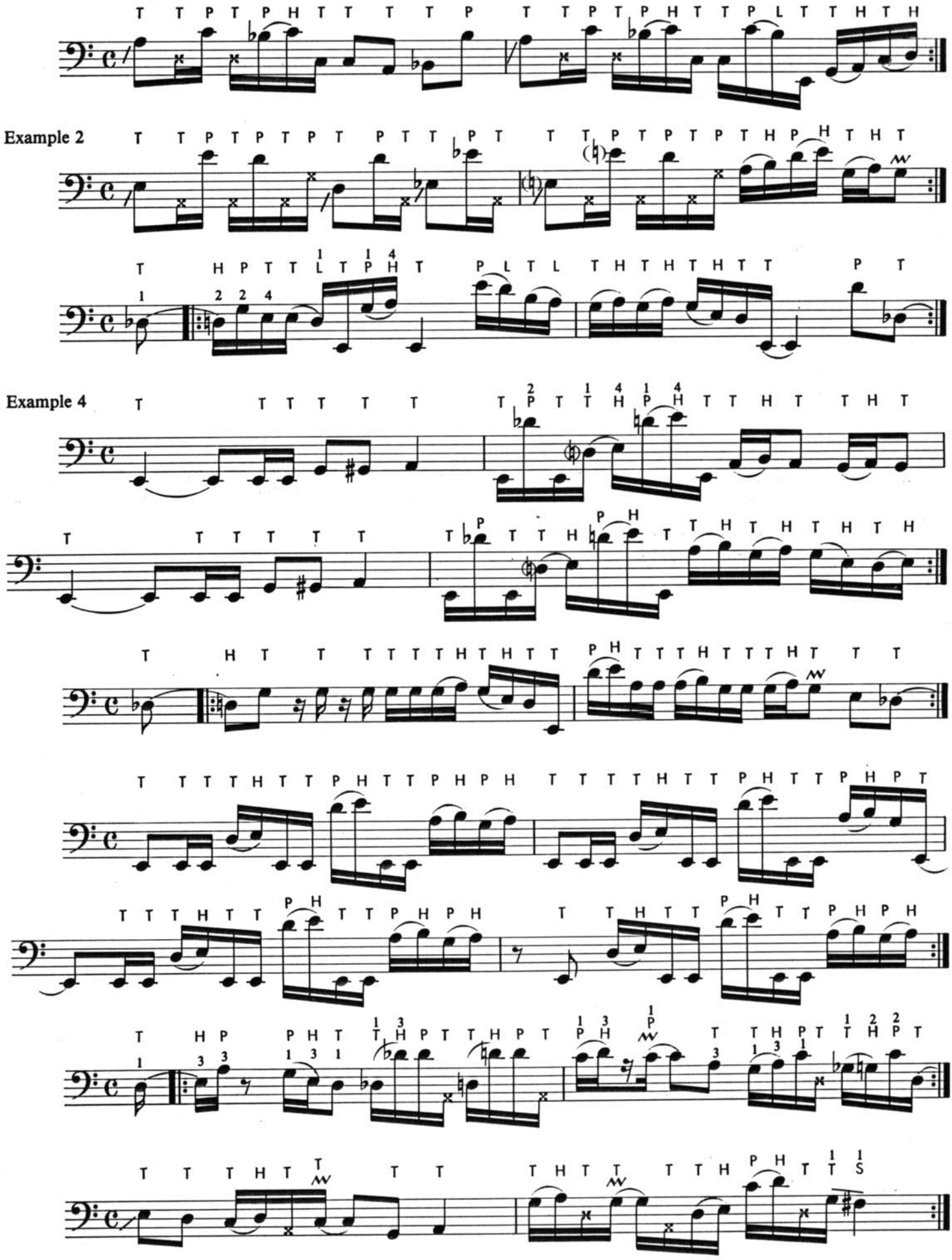
Example 2
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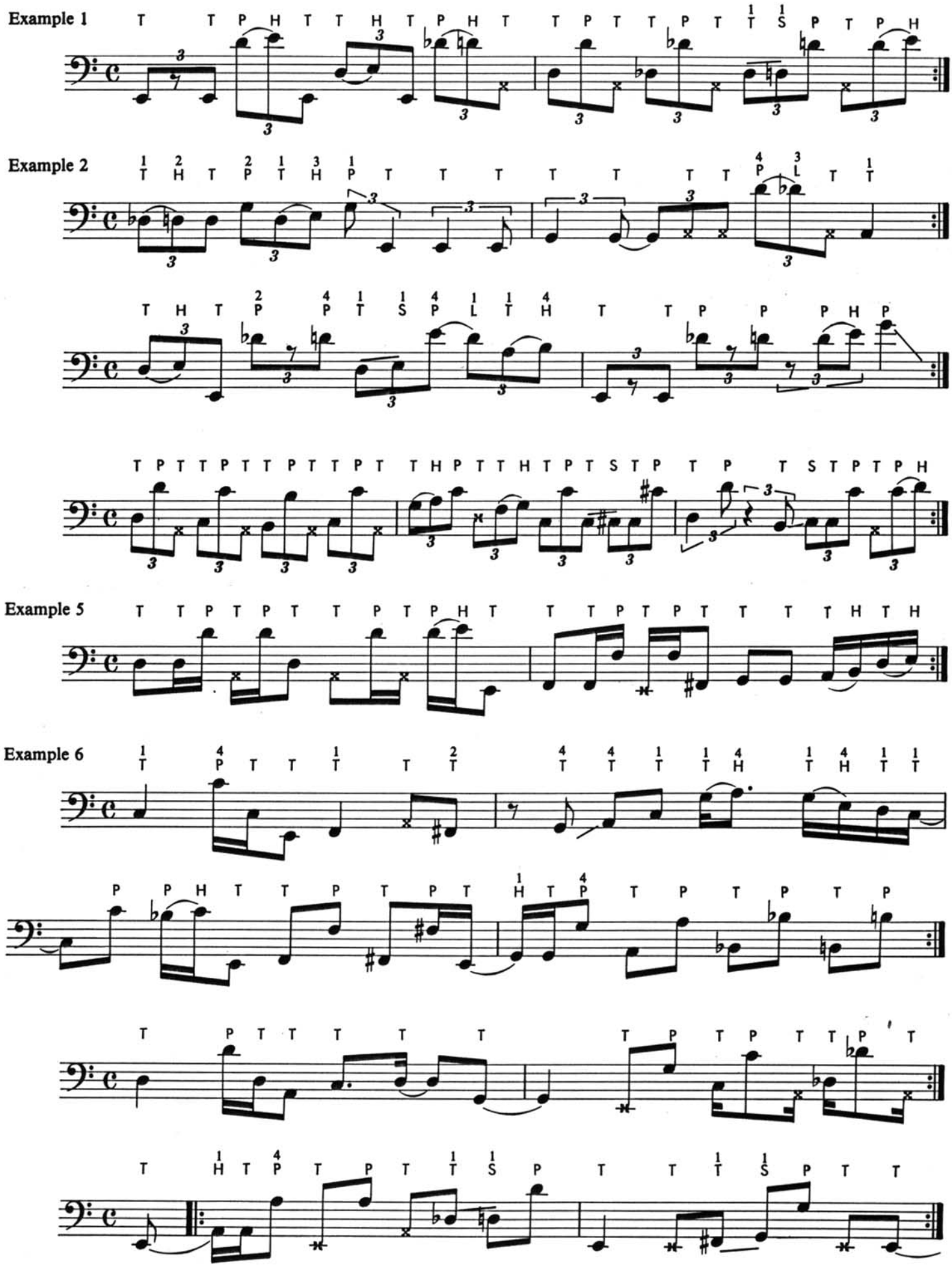
Example 1
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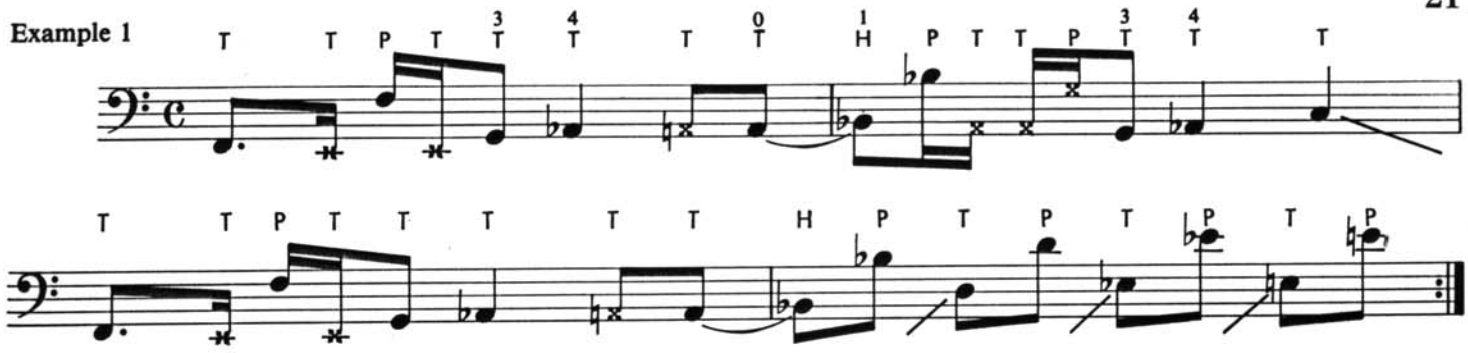
Example 6

Example 1



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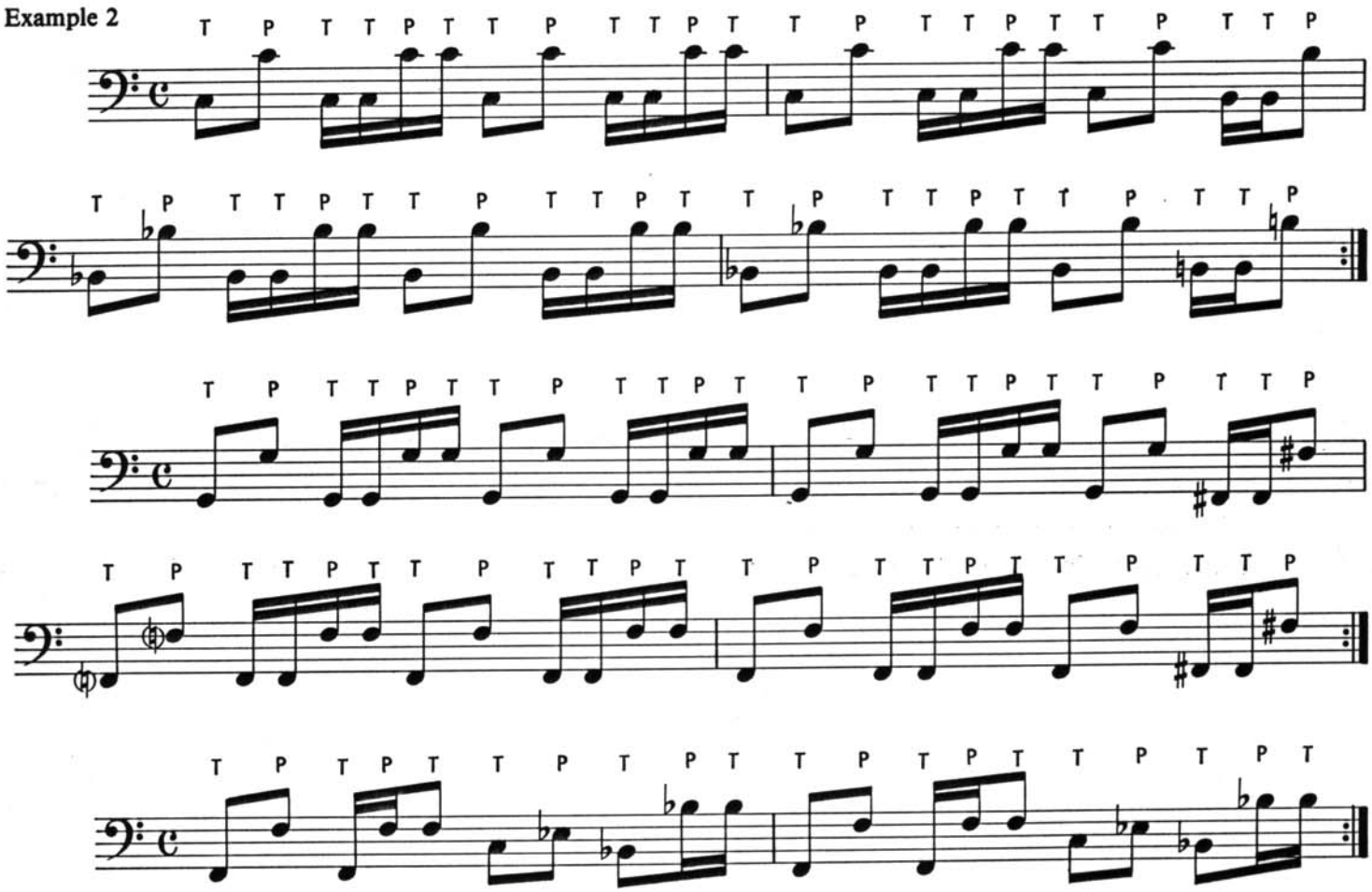

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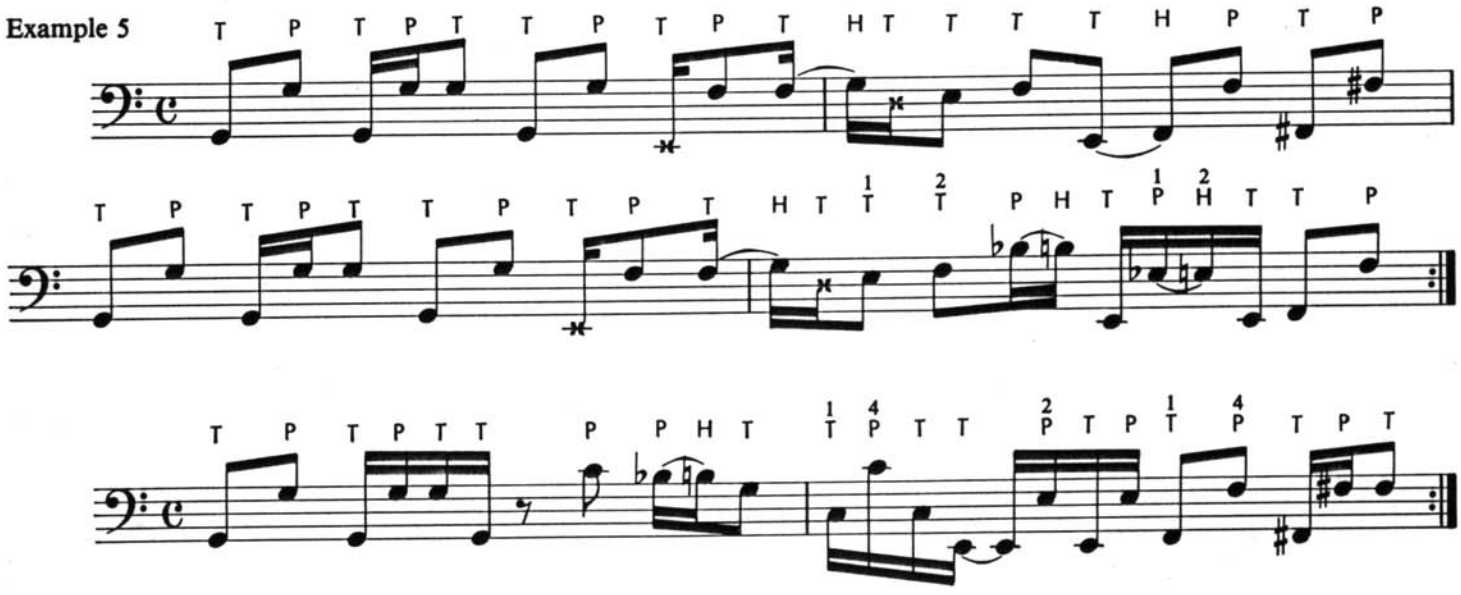

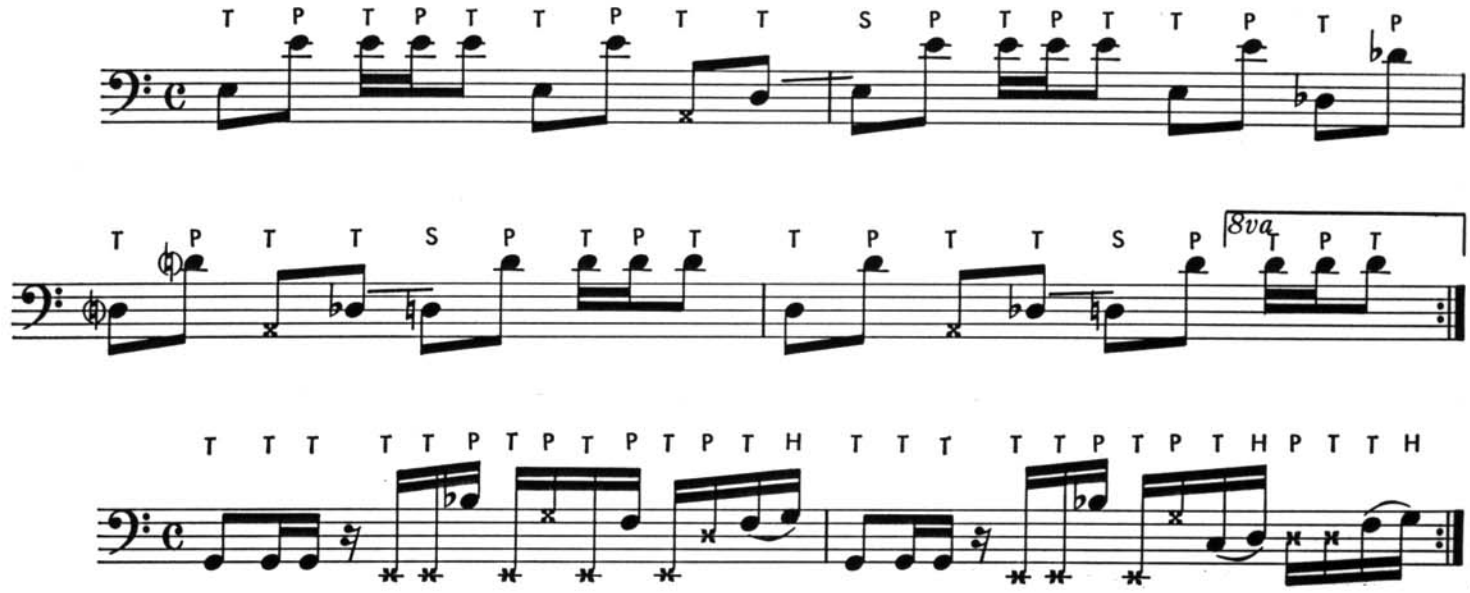

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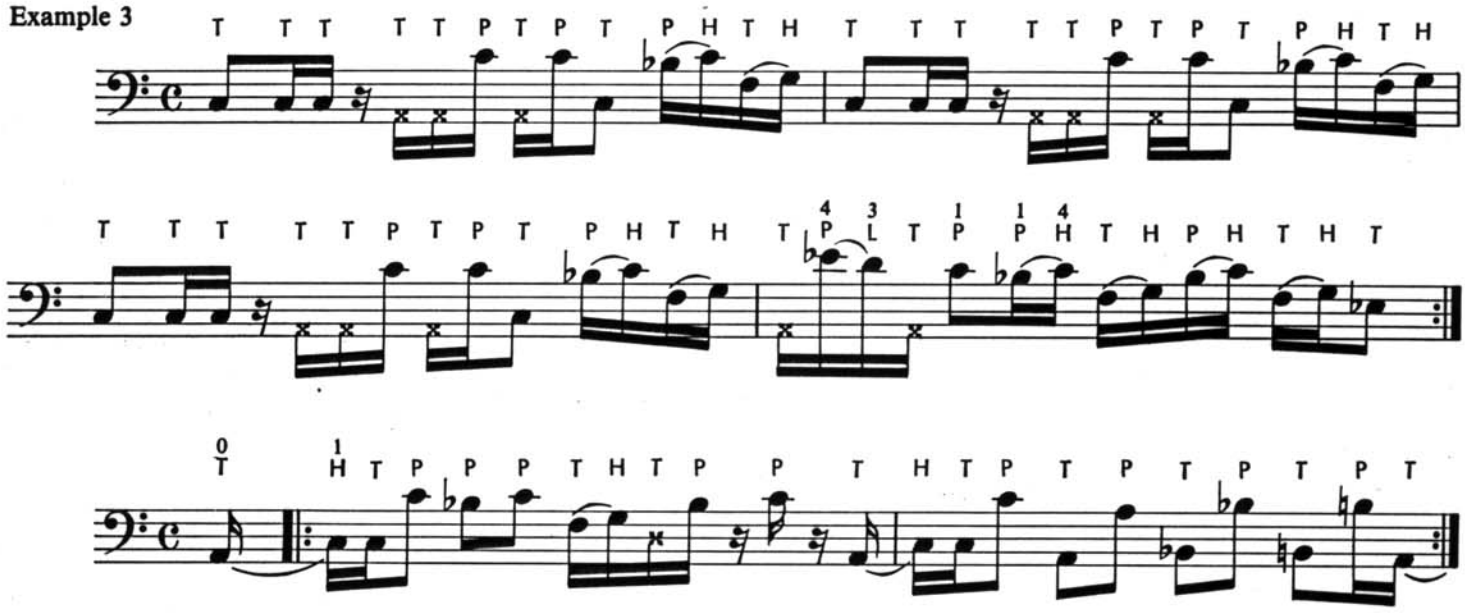

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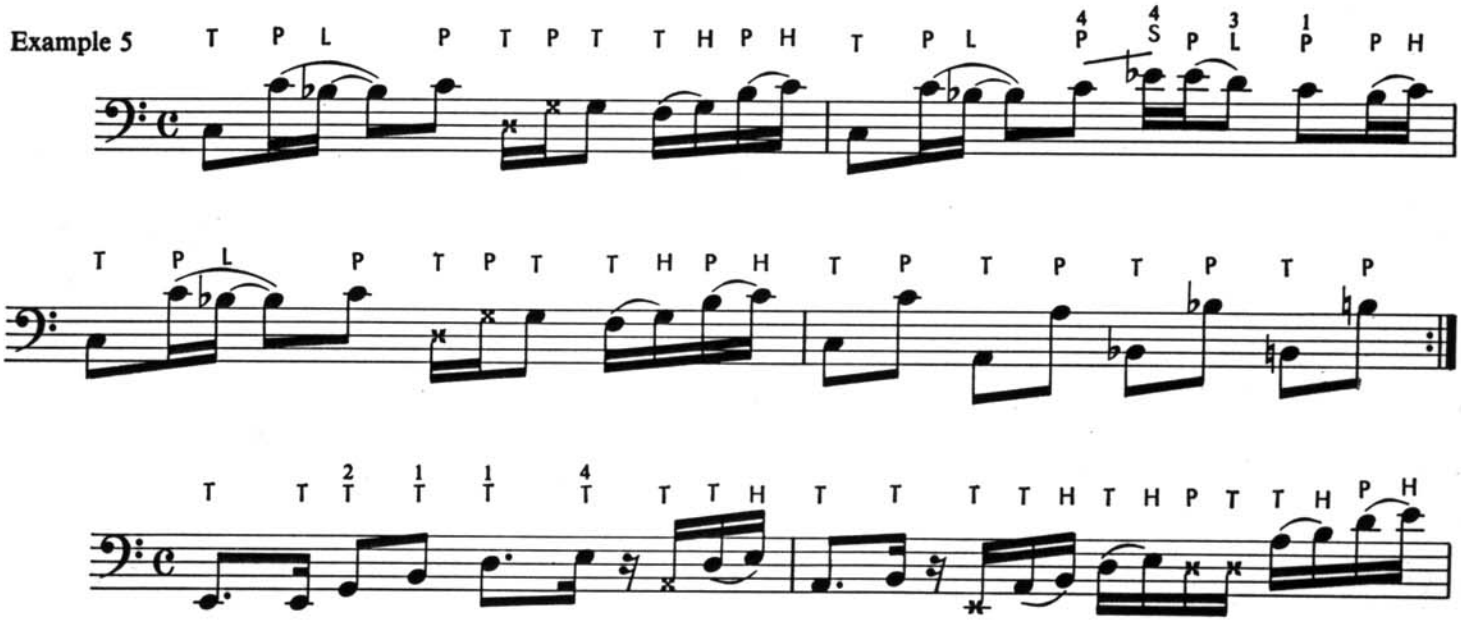

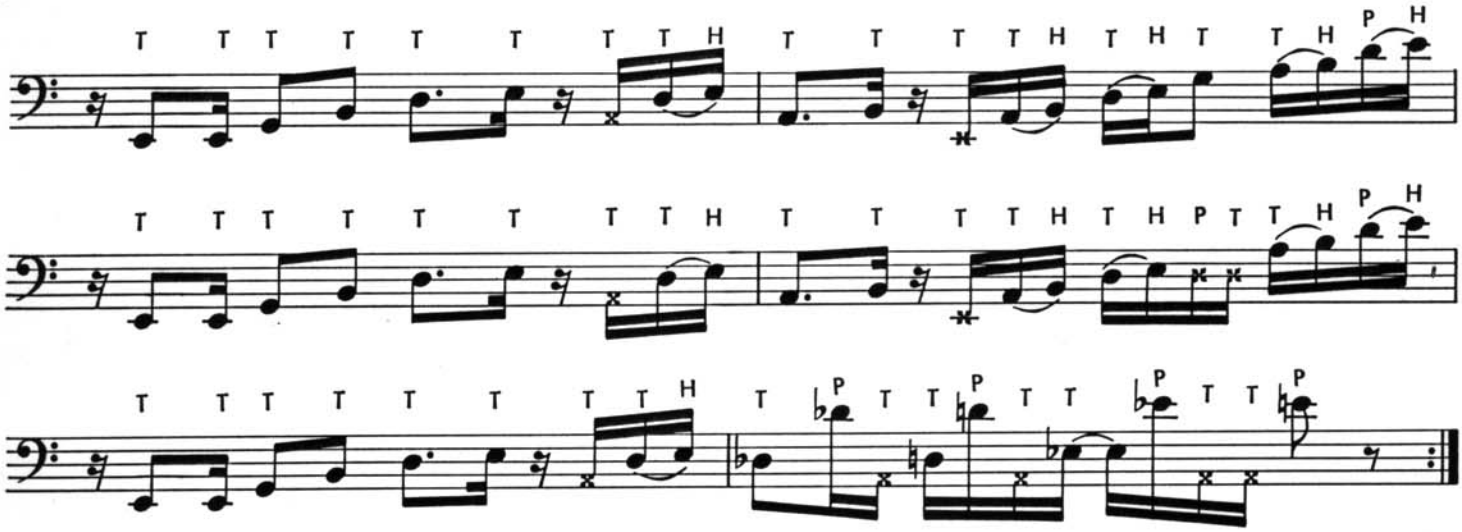

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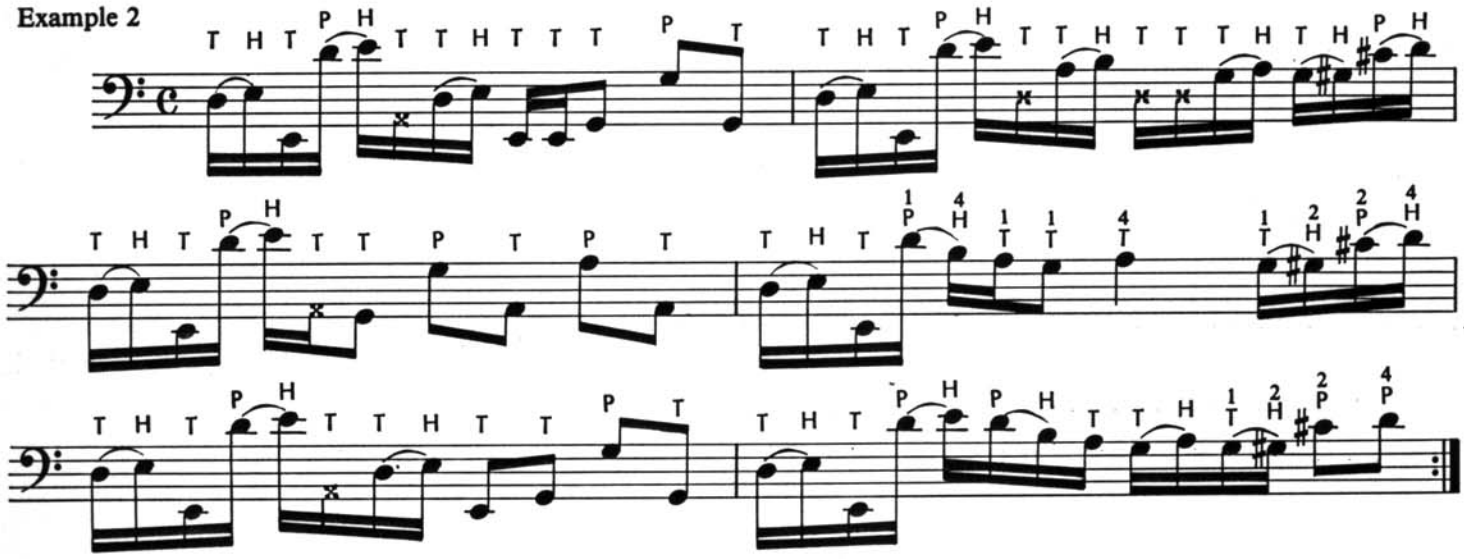

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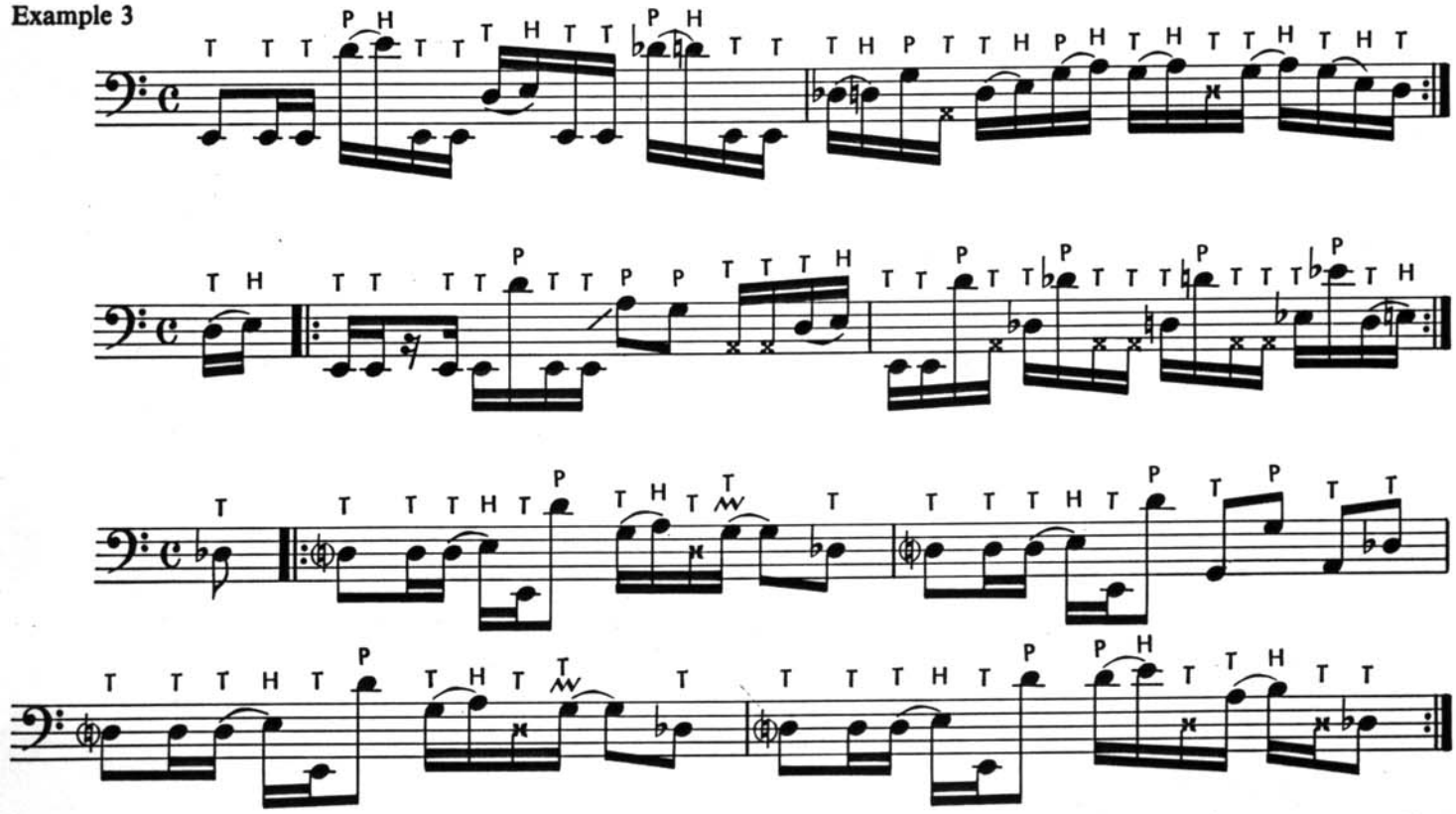

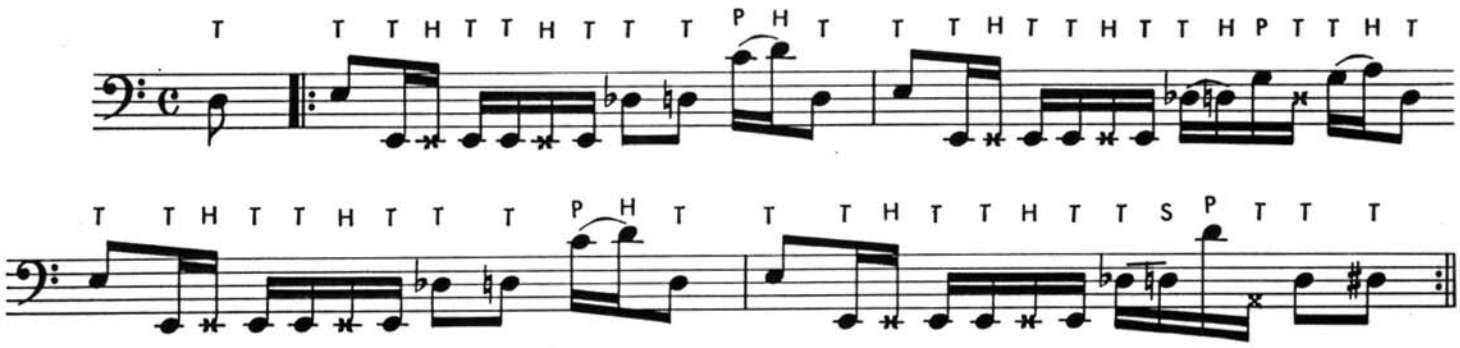

Example 2

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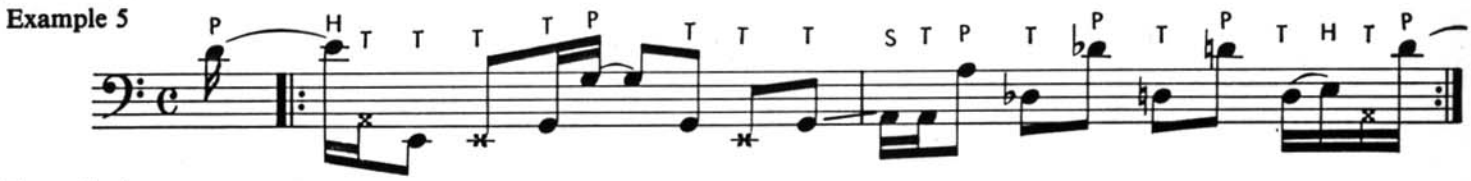

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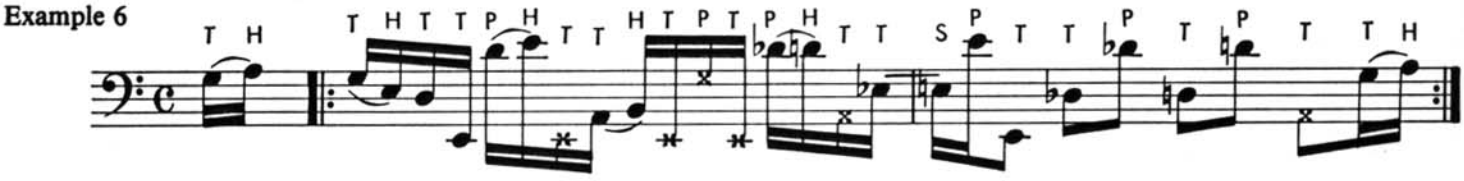

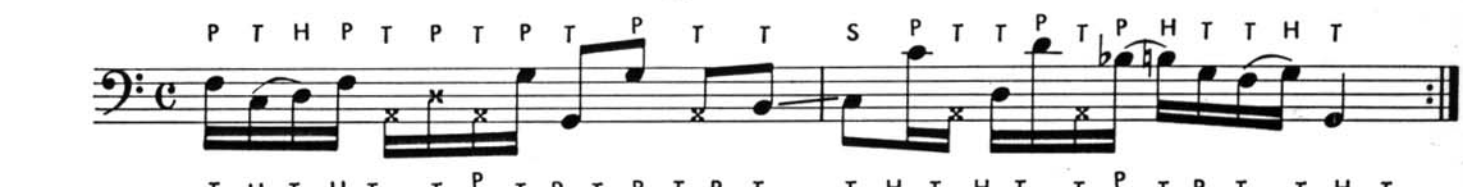

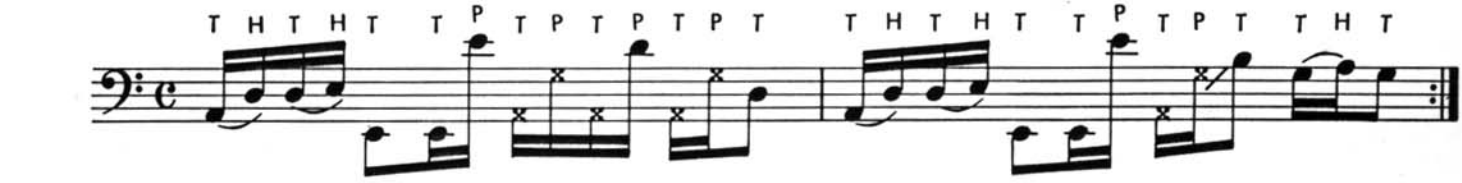

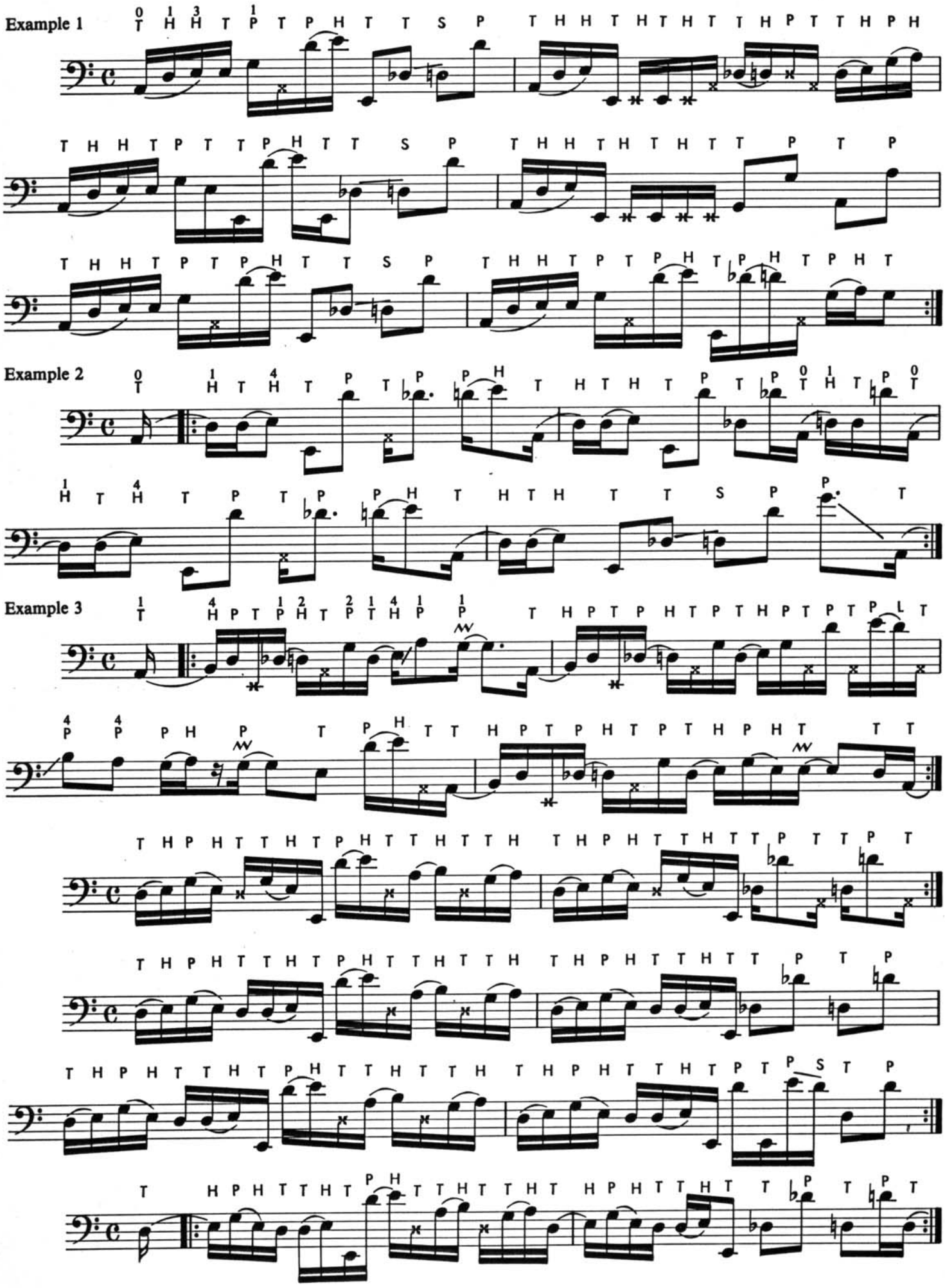
Example 1
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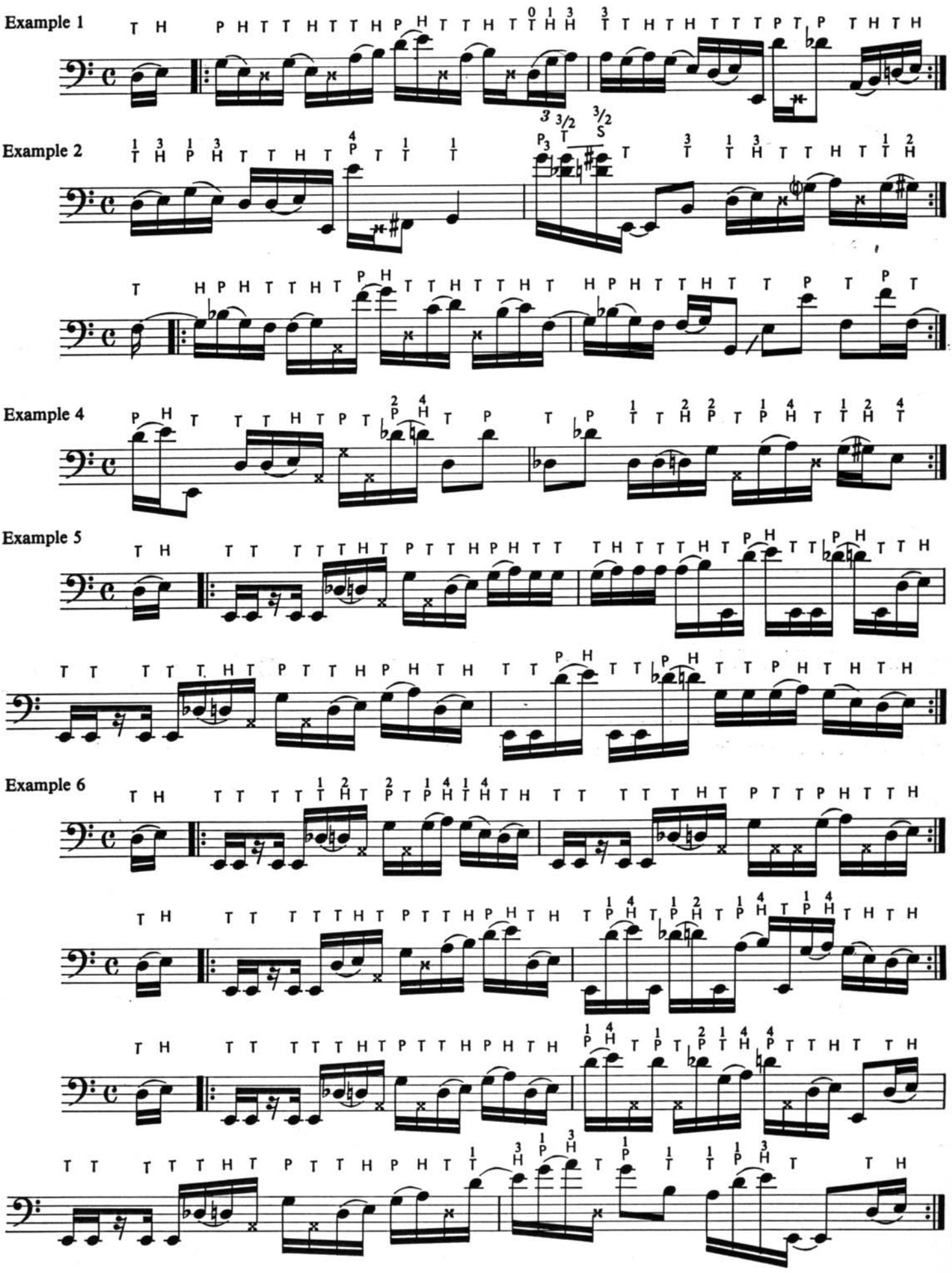
Example 1
Example 2
Example 4
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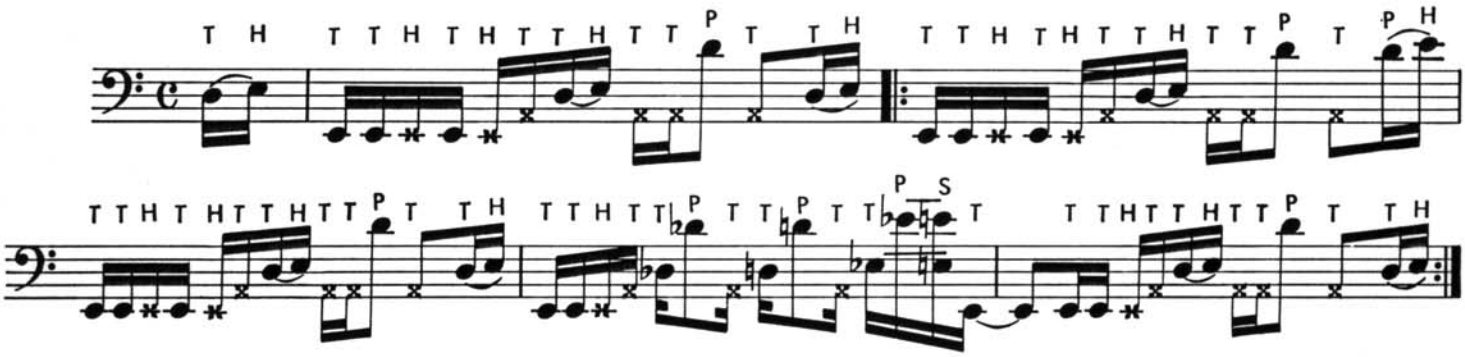
Example 6



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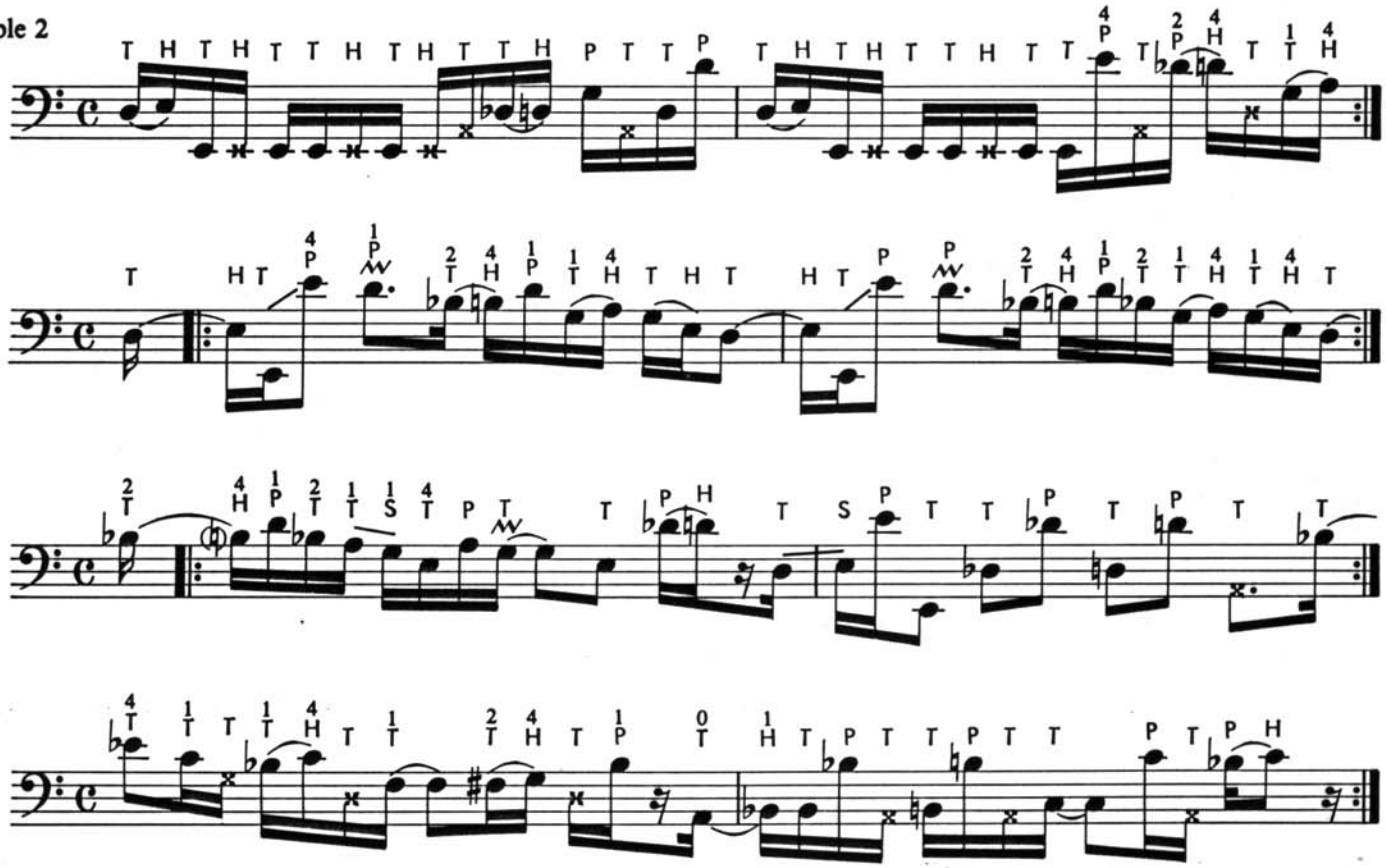

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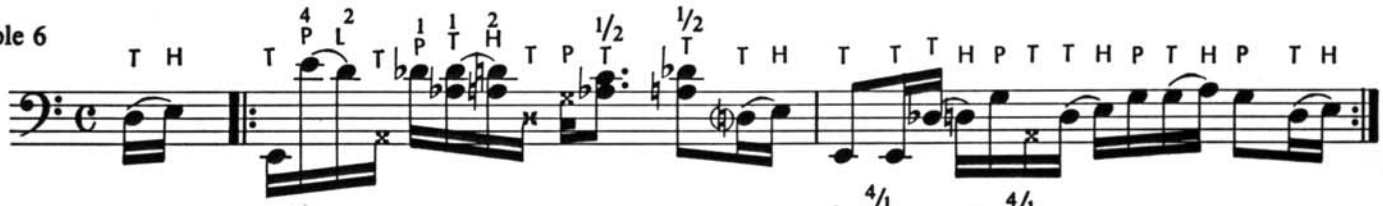

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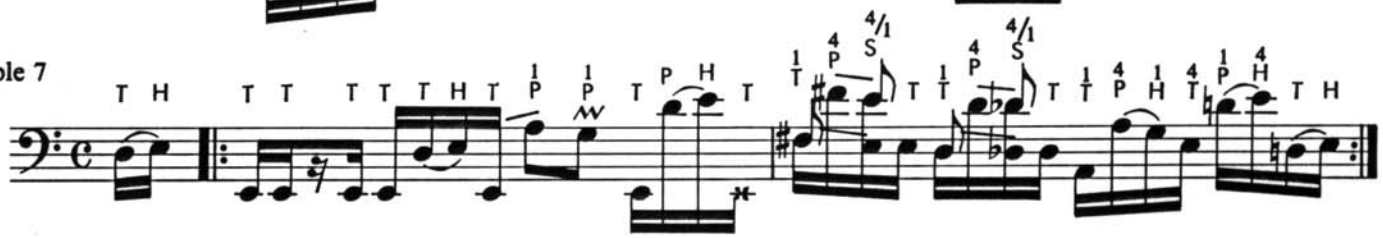

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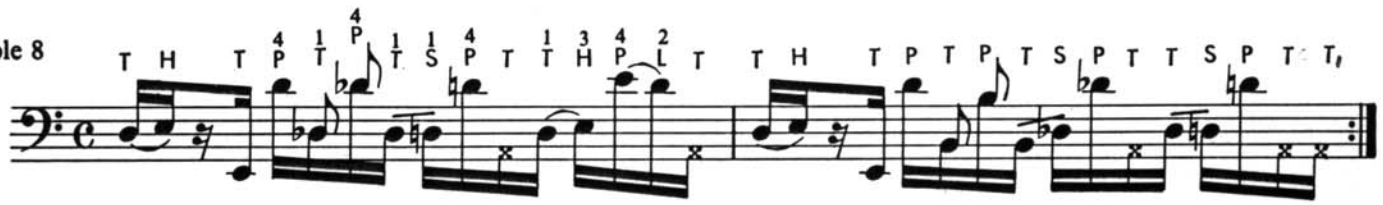

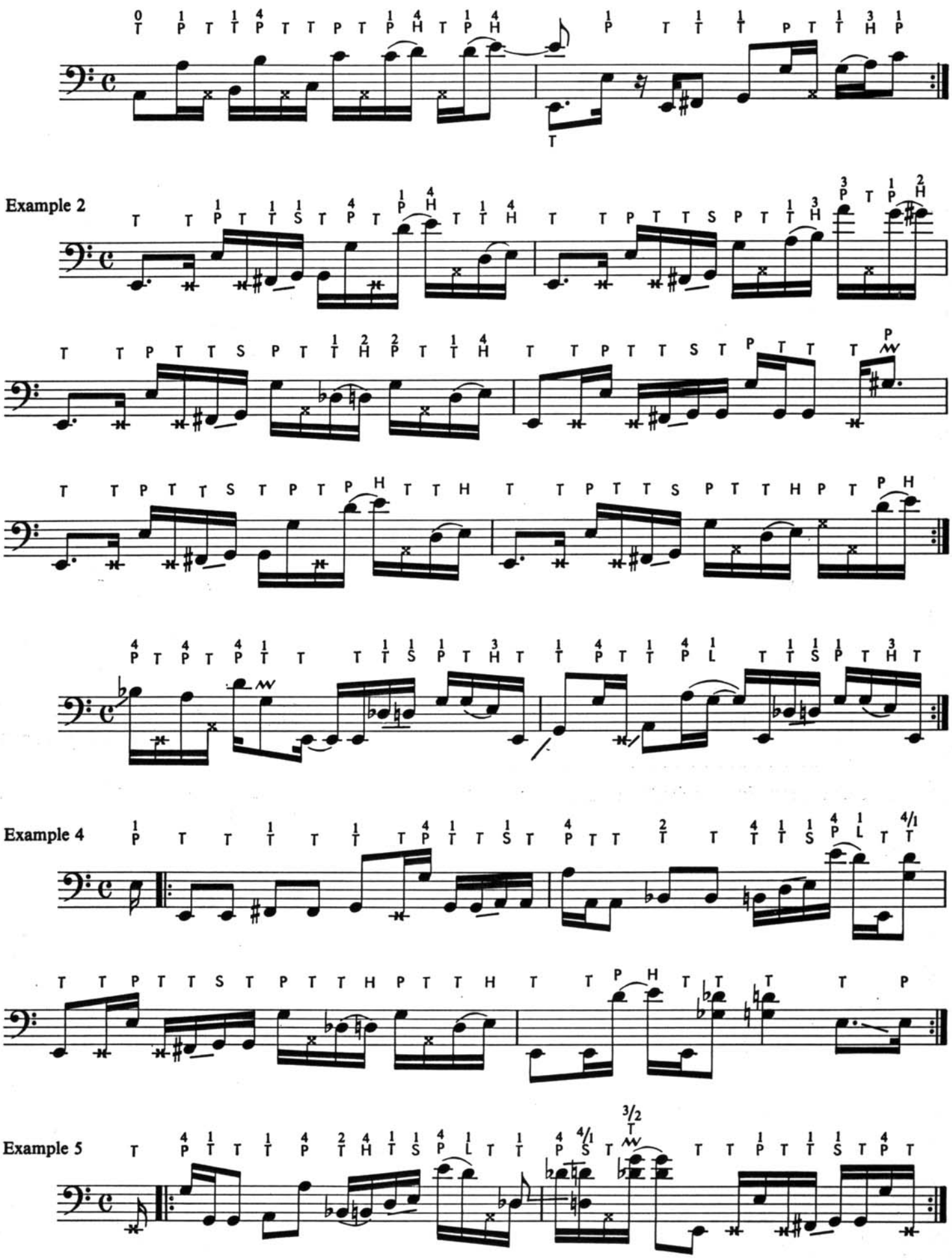
Example 2
Example 4
Example 5